



# THE BUFFALO BILL STORIES

The Only Publication authorized by the Hon. W.F. Cody ("BUFFALO BILL")

*Issued Weekly. By Subscription \$2.50 per year. Entered as Second Class Matter at New York Post Office by STREET & SMITH, 238 William St., N. Y.*

No. 14.

Price, Five Cents.

## BUFFALO BILL'S SADDLE SHARPS

OR  
THE PLEDGED PARDS OF THE PONY EXPRESS



THE AUTHOR OF  
"BUFFALO BILL"

"HANDS UP, BLACK PHANTOM!" SAID BUFFALO BILL.





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## BUFFALO BILL'S SADDLE SHARPS;

OR,

### The Pledged Pards of the Pony Express.

By the author of "BUFFALO BILL."

#### CHAPTER I.

##### THE "SPOOK RIDERS" OF THE OVERLAND.

They called them the "Spook Riders of the Overland Trail," and they well deserved the name.

Daring riders all of them, men picked for pluck, to endure hardships untold, and face death as they would a friend, if need be.

It was a wild, lonesome and deadly trail they rode, by night and by day, in storm and in sunshine, in blizzards of ice and under pouring rains, never faltering, never fearing, only determined to do or die.

They had been picked for the duty, to ride the long and heart-breaking, death-haunted express trail, the overland path that connected the rising with the setting sun.

If the trail proved not lonely, that meant that Indians

were on the war-path for the Pony Riders or that it had become known that a rider was to carry through a valuable package, and hence road agents were in ambush, and it was "his life or the gold."

Like "Spook Horsemen," the gallant Pony Riders flitted along the deadly overland trail, making history; laying the cornerstone of a grand civilization to spring up along their then desolate and dangerous pathway, and gather about themselves by their deeds a halo of romance and fiction that will grow in charm and interest the further removed we are by time from those scenes.

So much for an introduction to the heroes of the Pony Riders express trail, and among whom, with many other dashing, daring spirits, wild riders and dead shots all of them, was William F. Cody, the man whose border name of Buffalo Bill, and who is known in every land, across every sea, and always as representing the



ideal of splendid American manhood, a type that must soon pass away from our country's earlier history never to return.

Julesburg was the headquarters of one of the divisions of the Pony Riders and stage line, and Alf Slade was the chief.

Here congregated a strange mixture of humanity, and the scene was like a guarded camp, for men held themselves in readiness to protect the property of the company from horse thieves, to fight Indians, or pursue a band of outlaws who had held up a coach or Pony Rider.

The camp of the Pony Riders was on the river, and there dwelt Buffalo Bill in his little cabin, with two comrades.

The two companions of Buffalo Bill were Hart Rathburn and Scott Kane, handsome, fearless fellows, and the trio had run more deadly gauntlets than any men in the pony express.

Particularly had Buffalo Bill escaped the traps set for him by the outlaws, and though he had twice had a horse shot under him, once received a severe wound, and at other times appeared to be wholly at the mercy of his foes, he had never yielded, nor lost his treasured express pouches, but brought them through in safety.

At the time of which I write the Pony Riders had been having a particularly hard struggle of it against a band of outlaws, known as the "Night Riders."

These lawless men were commanded by a chief, who was as merciless as an Indian, and as cunning as a fox.

Then, too, he was one who ruled his men with military discipline, and his manner of striking his blows at the express riders, coaches and stations was peculiar, for he moved only at night.

It was said that his men dressed in black, and rode black horses, and this gained them their name of night riders, as well as the fact that they were seen only in the night time.

Where they had their retreat no one knew outside of the band, and though the best scouts had trailed them, they had never been able to find where they hid themselves.

Several times of late the most daring raids had been made by the outlaws upon the company's stock, and both the coaches and Pony Riders had had deadly gauntlets to run—Buffalo Bill escaping death, as it were, in a

miraculous way, and saving the valuable freight he carried.

Then came a letter from the Night Riders' chief to Alf Slade, in which was a warning to Buffalo Bill in particular.

Buffalo Bill did not heed the warning, and declined to be sent elsewhere upon the trail to ride, and said that as the Night Riders had declared war against him, he would return the compliment, and the daring rider made his way to his own camp, where he found his two companions awaiting him, Hart Rathburn calling out as he approached:

"Ah, Bill, glad you've come, for you brought me a letter in your run to-day I wish to read to you, for I need your advice."

"And I wish to have a talk with you and Scott," responded Buffalo Bill, as he took his seat at the little table upon which supper had been served by Scott Kane, it being his week to be the cook, for the pards took turns in the work to be done about their cabin.

"All right, Bill; what is it?"

"No; let me hear your story first, for what I have to say will keep, only it is most important, as you will see. Now fire away, Hart."

"Well, as I said, you brought me a letter, and I wish to read it to you.

"You know I came out West from a love of adventure—at least, that is the story I have told, though I know many have suspected that I had more reason for so doing than a desire to fight Indians and hunt a fortune.

"The truth is, my father was an army officer, and I was born at a frontier post, as was also my sister, three years my junior. We were raised in forts in the Southwest and West, and that accounts for my knowing so much of wild life, though a professed tenderfoot.

"At my father's death, my mother went East, and my sister was sent to boarding-school, I to college, and we were supposed to be heirs to a good fortune.

"But mother married again—a California miner who was reported to be very rich.

"He was a widower, with one son, several years older than I, and he was a most fascinating young man.

"He had been educated for the army, but was forced to resign for some reason; he traveled for several years, until his father settled him upon a ranch in Texas, and he won my sister's heart, and, when my mother refused



to allow her to marry him, although not related, he ran off with her, taking her from her boarding-school.

"This act on his part was forgiven, but then my mother was surprised to find out that her husband was not a rich man, and he had not only dissipated her fortune, which she had entrusted to him, but my sister's and mine, and he had paid his own and his son's debts with our inheritance.

"Nor was that all, for there appeared upon the scene a woman who claimed the Californian as her husband, and had proofs to support her claim.

"The shock was so great my mother never recovered from it, and in ten days after the news of how she had been deceived, and that she was left very poor, she died.

"We were from the South, and there we avenge personal wrongs; so I called my stepfather to account, immediately after the funeral.

"I'm a good shot, you know, and my bullet cut through his heart. Then I left home and came West to seek a fortune.

"Just a year after, I had a letter from my sister, in which she told me she had just recovered from a severe attack of illness, caused by her husband's effort to kill her by slow poison.

"He was discovered in the act by the nurse, and she put the doctor on his guard, the result of which was that they set a trap for the murderer and caught him.

"He escaped by flight, carrying with him all of my sister's jewels and family plate, and then it was discovered that he had forged her name and robbed her of all she had left of the fortune, save some landed property.

"Now it turns out that this landed property is most valuable, will make both Rita and myself rich, but as all was in our stepfather's name, so placed by my mother, and he made a will before his duel with me, giving all over to his son, that son must sign certain papers before the property can be sold, as it must be, for all around it a city is springing up.

"Rita writes me that her fugitive husband is out here, on the Overland, as a Pony Rider, stage driver or serving in some capacity, and she is coming here to look him up.

"She says she will take charge of our cabin, for I have written her about you, Bill, and Scott, and she wishes to quietly search for Burr Ford, for such is his name.

"She says I am to look for her within a week, and now I wish to ask your advice as to what I am to do?"

"Do? Why, what can you do, Rathburn, but receive her and aid her in her search?"

"This is no place for ladies; but you say she knows what frontier life is, so it will not surprise her.

"There is, you know, the widow of Stage Driver Drayton, who was shot, and we'll get her to come over and be a help to your sister. We'll set the boys to work to build her a nice cabin and make her comfortable while she is here, and we'll take a hand in the hunt for that villain-husband of hers, and when we find him, I guess he'll sign any papers she wishes him to put his name to."

"So say I, Bill," said Scott Kane, heartily, and so it was arranged that Rita Rathburn, for Hart would not call her by her married name, was to be warmly welcomed into the Pony Riders' camp.

## CHAPTER II.

### THE PLEDGE OF THE PARDS.

In the station camp the men were divided into Pony Riders, stage drivers, and their assistants, stock tenders and hangers-on.

Alf Slade was chief of all, while the separate companies had their captains.

Hart Rathburn and Scott Kane were devoted to their leader and comrade, Buffalo Bill, and they were men after his own heart, for they were utterly fearless, dashing, generous-natured fellows.

Both of them were handsome men, athletic in build, wore their hair long, and while Kane dressed in the style of the camps, Rathburn always wore good clothes and a white silk shirt.

Kane's life was a mystery, and not even to his two most intimate pards had he spoken of his past.

With considerable interest, both Buffalo Bill and Kane had listened to all that Rathburn had to say, and after they had expressed their intention to make his sister as comfortable as circumstances would permit, also aid in the search for Burr Ford, Cody said, in his quiet way:

"Now I'll tell you what I have to report, pards."

The two were at once all attention.



"I have just had a talk with Mr. Slade, and he wishes to put me elsewhere upon the trail."

"But why, Bill?"

"Don't go, Bill."

"I am not going; but his reason was a kind one to me, for it was on account of a letter he had received from Captain Kit, of the Night Riders, threatening my life if he kept me on, so he wished to transfer me on the trail."

"And they are threatening you by letter, are they?"

"Yes, Hart."

"I don't wonder, as they have never been able either to catch, rob or kill you," Kane observed.

"Oh, you two were also mentioned, for they seemed to have waged war against us three."

"Then we'll wage war, too."

"Yes, and show them that we can play at the same game."

Buffalo Bill smiled and said:

"It is just what I knew you both would say and I so told Mr. Slade."

"Now, it seems I have kept more treasure from their grasp than any of the riders, and you two come next."

"Why they threaten I do not know, instead of killing, but they do threaten us with death, hoping, I suppose, to drive us off the run, and then catch the other riders."

"But you told the chief you would not go?"

"I did, and told him that I was sure you would be with me in this resolve."

"Right you are, Bill."

"You know what cards to gamble on, Bill."

"Well, I told him that we were here to stay, at the same time I would pledge myself to hunt down the Night Riders, and knew that you would be with me in the good work."

"I am."

"Command me."

"I knew what you would say, but as it will now be a man-hunt for us, we must change our present work in a measure, for I have a plan to suggest."

Hart Rathburn said with great earnestness:

"Name your wish, Bill, and I'll guarantee that Scott and I will back you up."

"As Pony Riders we have but one chance to strike a blow and discover what we wish, but with you, Hart, as stage driver—and no better driver is on the Overland—

and you, Scott, as stock tender, I remaining as Pony Rider, we can do a great deal of good."

"I believe you are right, Bill, but I hate to give up the saddle for the stock tender's cabin," urged Scott.

"And the coach will be dead slow for me after being a Pony Rider," Hart declared.

"Well, you will be four days in camp here with your sister, Hart, and three days on the run to Rocky Ridge and back."

"Yes, I will be glad of that, now I think of my sister's coming."

"And you, Scott, Mr. Slade will make stock tender at Rocky Ridge, and with you there, Hart driving stage, and I on my regular run, we will have a chance to pick up some news about these Night Riders which will enable us to turn the tables upon them."

"Do you agree?"

"I do."

"And I also."

"Then there is one thing more to be done," said Buffalo Bill, earnestly.

"I go out on my run in the morning, as you know, pard, so let us fix up our plan now while we are talking it over."

"If you take the coach, Hart, you start out day after to-morrow. And as the stock tender at the station beyond Rocky Ridge has been killed by outlaws, for Indians did not do it, I am sure, you will doubtless be sent there to-morrow, Scott, so we can begin work at once."

"None too soon for me," said Kane.

"I, too, am ready whenever needed, Bill," replied Rathburn.

"Well, I'll see Mr. Slade to-night, as soon as we have come to a thorough understanding, for you know I said that there was one thing to do first."

"Yes."

"Tell me what it is, Pard Bill."

"It is just this: To swear ourselves into a certain compact—that is, to pledge ourselves to stand by each other unto death."

"Agreed."

"So say I."

"You are both well aware that where so many men are employed there are sure to be black sheep creeping in."

"We have had evidence more than once that in our



midst there have been spies serving as drivers, riders and stockmen who were members of the outlaw band, simply ferreting out what information they could get that was of value to them."

"You bet there are such even now in our midst, Pard Bill, though we cannot just spot them."

"And lucky for them that we cannot," added Kane.

"Now I wish to bind myself and you, in a compact that will hold.

"Remember, I do not have a doubt of either of you, but where I am willing to so pledge myself, I wish you to do the same; but if you have any reason why you should not, simply refuse, and that ends it."

"I have no reason, Bill, and you know my story," responded Hart Rathburn, earnestly.

"My life story you do not know, Bill, nor does Rathburn, and there is no reason just now why you should; it is a love disappointment and deals with a bitter past; but I am ready to take the pledge, and you will find me as true as steel, and should either of you doubt me, simply send a bullet through my heart without warning." And Scott Kane spoke with considerable feeling.

"I will," was the stern response of Buffalo Bill. "I will kill either of you the moment I am given good cause to doubt you, and you both have the same right in my case, for this is to be a pledge to bind us in honor, to death if need be, and there must be no treachery, no hesitancy, no secrets unknown to each and all of us."

"I agree."

"As do I."

At the reply of the two men, Buffalo Bill arose, and, facing his two comrades as they sat there in their cabin, said:

"Stand up!"

They did so, and, going out of the cabin, he made a quick circuit around it, to see that no one was about.

Re-entering, he said:

"Now grasp hands and we'll take the pledge." It was done, and earnestly.

"Pards, I have just as much faith in you as I believe you have in me, and my word for it that we three will be the ones to run the Night Riders to earth.

"There are others I would like to have join us, for it is a big work to cut out for three men, but as long as we cannot be sure of every man, we must trust no one.

"Now I will go and see Mr. Slade, and then we will

know just what is before us," and Buffalo Bill left the cabin and walked rapidly over to the quarters of the division chief.

"Ah, Cody, I was just about to send for you," said Alf Slade, as the Pony Rider captain entered his cabin.

"Anything wrong, sir?"

"Not with the company—no, for, save that letter from Captain Kit threatening you, all goes well. Have you reconsidered your determination to remain, and come to tell me you will be transferred?"

"On the contrary, sir, I have come to tell you of a plan I have formed to hit back at the Night Riders. But how can I serve you, sir?"

"Good! When you have planned to hit back it means a great deal. But, first, to my case," and there was a shadow on the face of Alf Slade as he spoke.

"Yes, sir. That is it."

"I have got to kill a man."

"Yes, sir."

"Or he will kill me."

"Is it as bad as that, sir?"

"Yes, just that."

"Who is he?"

"Badman Bender, who is down on the rolls of the company as Buck Bender, assistant agent of division."

"I have heard he wanted your place, sir."

"Yes, that is it, and as his secret reports to headquarters did not get me dismissed, he concluded to dismiss me himself by killing me."

"I am sorry, sir, for he is a very bad, a dangerous fellow—the best shot, worst hand with a knife, and the strongest man on the Overland."

"So it is asserted, and he makes it his boast; but there is one man he has not yet drawn a revolver on, used a knife against or tested his strength with, Bill."

"Who is that, sir, if it is not yourself?"

"It is you, Cody."

"I have had no quarrel with him, sir."

"No, you do not seek trouble, and he has been wise enough to seek none with you; but if he kills me I shall leave him to you, Cody."

"To me, sir?"

"Yes, for I have orders in my last mail to discharge him, and it was this that brought on the trouble between us.



"I wanted to let him down easy, so called him aside to tell him quietly, my instructions.

"The superintendent said that as my assistant he could be of little use working against me, and as he had shown himself to be doing that, I should discharge him and appoint any man I deemed better in his place.

"I called him aside, and he at once accused me of having backcapped him, and drew his revolver."

"You did not draw on him, sir?"

"Oh, no; I think I understand men pretty well, and how to manage them.

"He called me a coward, and dared me to fight him; but I kept my temper, read the letter from the chief aloud, and then dismissed him."

### CHAPTER III.

#### THE BORDER DUEL.

"And did Bender kick, sir?" asked Buffalo Bill, and in his strangely quiet way Alf Slade continued:

"He was taken aback, but said the letter was a put-up job.

"But, having done my duty as I saw it, I told him then that I would meet him at the starting post to-morrow, at the time of arrival and departure of the riders, and fight him with what weapons he cared to select."

"Just what I expected of you, Mr. Slade."

"Yes, it was all I could do, for discipline must be enforced, you know. All the men in camp will be there, including those who saw and heard what passed between us."

"And what can I do, sir?"

"First, I shall now appoint you assistant in his place."

"I thank you, sir, for the honor, but I cannot accept the position."

"The pay is forty dollars more a month, as you know, and the place a good one."

"True, sir; but just now I prefer the harder work, and less pay of a Pony Rider, and my reasons I will explain to you."

"First, let me say that if I am killed you must take the place as full chief of this division in my stead.

"That man is discharged, you know, but refuses to acknowledge it, and will assume my place if he kills

me, and you know the chances are as much in his favor as mine, though I fear no man.

"Now, you must be assistant, whatever your motives for refusing, as I know of no man here whom I can put in my place to confront Badman Bender, should I fall.

"You can do so, and he must not be left in control of the company's papers, books, money and property here, so I call upon you to take the place until another can be sent here as division agent.

"Unless Badman Bender kills you, too, Bill, as he may me," added Alf Slade, with a smile.

"I must take the chances, as you do, sir; but the lightning does not strike twice in the same place, I have heard," was the quiet response of Buffalo Bill.

"You have told Badman Bender you would fight him with any weapons, sir?" asked Buffalo Bill, after a moment of thought.

"Yes."

"You are the challenged party?"

"Yes, and I wish you to serve as my second."

"Certainly, sir, for a request from my superior I regard as a command."

"Do you not wish to do so?"

"Mr. Slade, don't take that view of it, but let me give you the right one."

"I should like to hear it."

"I am a man of the West, a type of what is found on the plains and in the mountains to a certain extent; yet, though forced often, in the discharge of duty or in self-defense, to take human life, I abhor scenes of death and bloodshed."

"I believe you do, Cody, and I also do, though the saddest scenes have been forced upon me.

"But go on."

"I have little more to say, sir, than that I serve you from a sense of duty, and not from a desire to mingle in a death-grapple any more than you do."

"I believe you, and I feel that you will serve me well."

"I will do as I deem is best in the matter, and now I ask you why you did so foolish a thing as to say you would meet him with any weapons?"

"I wished him to understand that I did not fear him, or even dread him."

"No one who knows you would think that; but, suppose he selects bowie knives, as I believe he will?"

"I must meet him."



"He is over six feet tall, weighs two hundred, is known to be a most deadly hand with the knife, quick as a panther and strong as a buffalo bull."

"Still, I must meet him if he selects knives."

"Right there I take issue with you, Mr. Slade, and as you have placed yourself in my hands, I shall say no—that you, as the challenged party, shall select the weapons, and they shall be revolvers, which will place you on even terms."

"Hardly, Bill, as he is a much larger target," suggested Alf Slade, with a smile.

"He must take the chance of size, as you would have to were the weapons knives."

"I fear the men may regard it as a backdown?"

"Not after I have had my say, sir, and I'll have it as your second."

"All right, Bill, I am in your hands."

"Thanks for the confidence shown in me, sir. But, this being settled, let us turn to the cause of my visit to you!"

"Go ahead."

"I accepted the gauge of war the Night Riders offer, and have had a talk with my two pards."

"Rathburn and Kane?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well?"

"We have pledged ourselves to stand by each other in this matter, to live or die together."

"That means a great deal, Cody."

"It means that we either run the Night Riders to earth or they dig our graves for us. But the compact is a secret, and I came to secure your help."

"You shall have it, and if I fall to-morrow you are chief here to carry out your own views."

"Yes, sir; but you will not go under, and you'll find me no false prophet. Now, you know that Rathburn is a man of education, and I have heard his story."

"He is a good fellow."

"Yes, sir, and he and his have known sorrow and trouble."

"His sister is coming here to visit him in his wild frontier home to try and find her husband, and we are going to make her as comfortable as possible."

"A woman in this camp, and one who must be refined and——"

"She will be all right, sir, for she was raised on the frontier, and it will help the camp, her being here."

"I do not know but what you may be right, Bill. When is she coming?"

"Within a few days, sir, and to carry out our plan, I am going to ask you to have Rathburn drive the coach to Rocky Ridge and back, and let Kane take the station as stock tender at Wild Water."

"But they are Pony Riders."

"True, sir; but Rathburn drives splendidly, and Kane understands the care of stock."

"But what do they say to the change?"

"They are more than willing, sir, for that is our little game we are to play with the Night Riders."

"All right; I shall issue the orders to-night, and have them enter upon their separate duties to-morrow."

"Thank you, sir."

"But Rathburn's sister is coming?"

"He will, as driver, be four days in camp."

"True, and you can plan as you please, and I will back you up, Cody. Now you had better get what rest you can, and bright and early in the morning I will be at the post to settle with Badman Bender."

Bidding his chief good-night, Buffalo Bill went to his quarters to tell his comrades that all was arranged as they had wished it to be.

The start of the Pony Riders was made from a post in front of the general assembling quarters, where the coaches also halted, and from which they departed.

It was a large cabin, with kitchen, eating room, bar and gambling saloon attached, and there, day and night, gathered the men, drivers, Pony Riders and stock tenders.

The Pony Rider was due about eight o'clock in the morning, and the one to take his pouches and continue on was always ready at his post, so that not half a minute of time was lost in the change.

Much earlier than usual, the men hastened toward the Pony Riders' post, the morning after the affair between Badman Bender and Alf Slade.

The sympathy was with the chief, for the assistant agent was feared and disliked, and as he had decided to fight with bowie knives, there were few that thought Slade had any chance with him in a personal encounter thus fought.



But all knew the pluck of the division agent, and they hoped that something might occur to save him.

"Boss Bender" had deliberately sharpened his bowie the night before in the barroom, and as he had remarked, had "put a razor edge on it."

That there was to be a duel to the death no one doubted, and all duties were neglected so that the men could be early upon the scene.

Buffalo Bill was to be the Pony Rider out, and an hour before starting time he was seen coming from his cabin and Alf Slade with him.

His two companions, Rathburn and Kane, were already at the post, listening to the talk of Bender, who was certainly in a fighting mood.

All eyes were turned upon Slade and Buffalo Bill as they approached, the latter having evidently made some amusing remark, as the former was smiling.

"I am here to meet you as agreed, Bender," said Alf Slade, amid the breathless silence that followed the approach of the chief and his second.

"I'm here, Slade, so git yer knife," was the gruff response.

"I have placed myself in the hands of Assistant Division Agent William Cody, your successor, so he will arrange."

"What's he got to do with it?"

"Just what he deems best."

"Wal, I'm assistant division agent here, and soon will be chief, and acknowledge no one else."

"See here, Bender," said Buffalo Bill, "the question is just this: As the challenged party, Mr. Slade has the choice of weapons, and I have selected revolvers in his behalf."

The words were coolly uttered, and every eye was upon Buffalo Bill.

As for Bender, he was seen to slightly change color, but he blurted out:

"The weapons is bowie knives, and he's a coward if he don't use them."

"The man who says Alf Slade is a coward lies, and knows he lies, and your desire to use a knife against one who is not your equal in size, strength or dexterity in handling a blade, shows who the coward is."

"Men, I appeal to you if it would be a fair fight with knives between two such men?"

A perfect roar of voices shouted:

"No!"

The crowd was on the side of fair play, and Bender realized it, but said:

"He said any weapons, and I choosed knives."

"You chose the weapons you were least likely to be hurt with, but select your second and I'll arrange with him very quickly for the fight."

"Pards, I appeal to you if this is a squar' deal?" cried Bender.

A few voices cried out:

"Knives was agreed on, and they should be used."

"I will meet him with the bowie," impatiently said Alf Slade.

"I say no! Revolvers are the weapons you are to use with him, but if he thinks he must first have a knife fight, I will try him on!"

A perfect yell of admiration greeted this remark of Buffalo Bill, and all eyes were turned upon Bender.

But before he could reply, Alf Slade said, sternly:

"My fight first, and if you are not a coward, Bender, you will meet me with revolvers."

"Yes, revolvers! revolvers!" shouted the crowd, and Bender saw he was in a very small minority and must yield, especially as he claimed to be the best shot on the Overland trail, so he growled out:

"Revolvers goes, then, fer I'd just as soon shoot yer, Slade, as knife yer!"

But for the determined stand taken by Buffalo Bill, all knew that Slade would have fought with knives, and with hardly a chance in a hundred of victory.

That Bender deeply felt the change of weapons was shown by the manner in which he glared at Buffalo Bill, and those who knew him best were sure that a second duel would follow quickly on the other, should Alf Slade fall.

Bender would not lose an instant in calling Buffalo Bill to account, and that it would be a duel to death with knives all who knew both men were assured.

"Well, draw and let us git at it!" called out Bender.

"No; this shall be a fair and square fight as we demand; so name your second," firmly proclaimed Buffalo Bill.

"I don't want no second!"

"See here, Bender, if you are in earnest, and not a coward, you will fight as we demand; so name you



second, and I will consult with him, while if you attempt any trickery you'll be shot so quick you will not know who killed you."

"Then there's a gang ag'in me?"

"No, only all are determined to see fair play. Now name your friend."

Cornered as he was, Bender glanced over the crowd and called out as his eyes fell upon a man of his stripe:

"Roper Dick, will you stand by me?"

"You bet, for Buf'ler Bill don't scare me a leetle bit."

"I cannot see why I should, for I do not understand why one man should fear another, Roper Dick," was the reply.

"Well, what's ther game?"

"Revolvers are the weapons, so disarm your man, as I will mine, and each weapon will be given them when they are in position, thirty feet apart.

"At the word fire! they can draw trigger as quickly as they please and advance upon each other, firing as they do so.

"Here, toss with me for the word!" and Buffalo Bill took from his pocket a twenty-dollar gold coin he always carried as a "luck-piece," it having been coined in the year of his birth.

Tossing it in the air, as the crowd gathered around, he called out:

"Heads or tails?"

"Tails!"

"Heads win!"

"No, best two in three, and I wants a toss!" cried Bender.

"All right, Bender; best two in three, and Roper Dick tosses for you."

"No, I does myself!"

"I say no, and that settles it!"

"Then begin now!"

"I have won once."

"That don't count," urged Bender.

"All right; what do you say, Roper Dick?" and the coin was again tossed into the air.

"Heads!"

"Tails win," calmly announced the Pony Rider.

"Now it is your throw, Roper Dick."

Bender whispered something to his second, as he took the coin, and Roper Dick tossed it high in air, Buffalo Bill saying, distinctly:

"Heads!"

"And heads it is!" cried a number of voices.

"I have won the word, Roper Dick. Now place your man."

The distance of thirty feet was paced off, but Bender did not wish to part with his weapons, and but for the angry looks of the crowd would not have done so.

He yielded with bad grace at last, and the two men were placed in position.

"Are you ready?" called out Buffalo Bill, as the men stood, weapons in hand.

"Yes," answered Alf Slade, with no show of emotion.

"You bet!" cried Bender, in a voice of thunder, as if intended to intimidate.

"Fire!"

The hands went quickly up, and the finger on Bender's trigger must have had a convulsive twitching, for his revolver exploded before the weapon was at a level, the bullet striking the ground at one side of Slade.

Before he could fire a second shot, and quickly following his, came the report of Slade's weapon.

His aim had been true, for his bullet turned Bender half around by the force of the shock, and, staggering backward, he fell his length, his revolver dropping from his hand.

But instantly he rallied, grasped it, and would have fired upon Slade who had turned away, but a shot rang out, and his hand dropped torn and bleeding to his side, while, with a groan, Bender sank in a heap, apparently wounded, perhaps fatally.

#### CHAPTER IV.

##### THE WARNING.

"I'm not dead yet, Slade, and I'll lay you out," cried Bender.

Alf Slade had his back to his enemy, and did not realize his danger. Buffalo Bill both heard and saw, and a quickly aimed shot passed through the hand that held the revolver, and Bender's treachery was thwarted.

"See if he is beyond aid, or if you can help him, Stevens," ordered Alf Slade, quietly, to his stock-keeper, who was also the surgeon of the camp.

Doc Stevens, as he was more familiarly called, went over to the groaning man and taking his hand glanced at the wound.



"The bullet passed through the hand, but did not break a bone—only a flesh wound," he said.

Then he threw the jacket back and opened the shirt, the act revealing that the bullet from Slade's revolver had struck on a rib and, glancing upward, had entered the shoulder.

"Not dangerous. Come, Bender, you are not much hurt, though you'll be laid up for a month or so. Rally, man, rally!"

"Then I hain't kilt, doc?" questioned Bender, brightening up quickly.

"Not a bit of it. I'll go to your quarters and fix you up, but lose no time for you are bleeding freely."

"Then I don't die, and I get my revenge!" muttered Bender, as he was assisted to his feet and walked away toward his cabin, just as a voice called out:

"Here comes the rider!"

Afar off the Pony Rider was seen coming along the valley at rushing speed, a cloud of dust following him.

Quickly toward the post Buffalo Bill stepped, and Alf Slade followed him.

"Cody," he said, in a low, earnest voice: "You saved my life, for that man would have killed me had we fought with knives, and again, but for your quick shot—I appreciate it, Bill."

He did not offer his hand, but his words and look meant much; more from Alf Slade than from most men.

"You will send Rathburn on the coach, sir, and Kane to Wild Waters?" asked Buffalo Bill, shrinking from being complimented or thanked.

"Yes, if you so wish, but do you still refuse the position of assistant agent, Cody?"

"Yes, sir; for just now I can do better by riding pony express, though I would be glad of the rest and the extra pay the other would give me."

"There is a reward on the head of Captain Kit, you know, and each one of his Night Riders."

"True, sir; but, put it as you please, it is blood money, and that I will never touch."

"You are a strange fellow, Cody," muttered Alf Slade, and he turned to the pony rider, who just then dashed up.

All saw that his left arm hung limp by his side, and his face was very pale, while from his fingers crimson drops were falling.

There was no need to tell that he had been fired upon

by outlaws or Indians; but, as he was helped from his saddle, he whispered, faintly:

"Night Riders!"

With a convulsive movement, the brave carrier fell forward, a dead man.

"God bless him! He died in the harness, and hung on to life to get his pouches in!

"Go, Cody, but look out for foes!" commanded Alf Slade.

The leather bags were flung over the saddle of Buffalo Bill, whose fine bay horse was rearing in his eagerness to go, and, with a bound, the handsome pony rider threw himself upon the back of the spirited animal and was away amid a rousing cheer for him.

All watched the brave rider, going, as many feared, to his own death, perhaps, until he disappeared in the shadow of the distant hills, and then turned to the dead form of Will Hope, who had clung to life until he got in with his precious freight, arriving at the post on schedule time.

They saw that the pony rider had two wounds, one in the arm made by a knife thrust, which showed in what close quarters he had been, while his hand also was gashed, and a bullet had entered his body.

There was a bullet shot in the saddle, also, while one of his reins had been slashed in two by a knife, and his horse had two slight gunshot wounds, and stood panting and nervous after his long and hard run.

"The Night Riders did it, Will Hope had said, and there is another pony rider to avenge," Alf Slade remarked.

He gave orders to prepare the body for burial, and then told Rathburn and Kane to report to his quarters in a short time, to be sent on other duty.

As he walked toward his quarters he mused to himself, half aloud:

"Yes, he saved me, no doubt of that. A remarkable man is Buffalo Bill, a wonderful man; and as he has undertaken to run down the Night Riders, I will leave it to him and not take the move against them which I had intended."

It is an acknowledged fact that Buffalo Bill can get more out of a horse than any one else, and as for human endurance in the saddle, he made records never exceeded, or indeed equaled.

His horses of the pony trail came soon to know him,



to understand his pace, and they went along without urging.

He made himself their master first, then their good comrade, and they loved him as he did them.

Dashing along a trail that many a rider before him had dreaded for its ruggedness, and also for its dangers, Buffalo Bill's searching eyes were watching the way well ahead.

No one knew better than he that every bush might shield a foe, behind every rock an ambushed assassin might be hiding, and canyon and timber hold a band of redskins to pounce upon him or give him a race for life. At last on this run, he came to a level bit of plain, with only here and there a boulder breaking the surface.

As he sped down the slope to the plain he suddenly saw a horseman ride out from behind one of those boulders and move forward toward the pony trail.

The horseman at once riveted the eye of the pony rider.

The big stone behind which he had been in hiding might conceal another horse and rider.

The horseman rode to the pony trail and halted.

He was then all of two hundred yards from the boulder under whose cover he had lurked.

The pony rider was yet a quarter of a mile away, but pressing rapidly on, and having only loosened his revolver for action, for he had not drawn rein, or shown other sign of having seen the man who barred his way.

The latter was well mounted, upon a black horse, with black bridle, bit and saddle, as well.

The rider was clad in black from head to foot, and altogether presenting a very funereal appearance.

His face was so thoroughly concealed beneath a black mask, and his hands encased in gloves equally as somber in hue, that no one could have told whether he was pale-face, redskin or negro.

As the pony rider drew nearer, still at the same speed, and with no idea of swerving from his trail, the horseman in black raised both hands above his head, the palms turned outward to show that they grasped no weapon.

"Hello! is it a night rider wishing to reform? More likely it is one who is willing to sell out the gang for cash," decided Buffalo Bill.

Then he added:

"I must look out for him."

On flew his horse at his full speed, the rider still showing no intention of drawing rein on account of the man in his trail.

A moment more and the somber horseman called out:

"Halt, Buffalo Bill, and hear what I have to say.

"See? I carry no weapons!"

The pony rider drew his horse to a walk, kept his other hand conveniently near his revolver, and advanced at a walk, while he replied:

"Talk quick, pard, I've got no time to lose."

"Do you know who I am?"

"A night rider, I take it, as you have the look of one, or an undertaker."

"I am a night rider, and I am here to warn you."

"Of what?"

"Of danger."

"Is that all——"

"You are booked to die."

"Maybe! but I'm warned by bullets oftener than by words."

"You must leave the pony trail."

"Why?"

"You'll be killed if you do not."

"See here, pard, I'm in the pony riding business for a living, and I'll not be scared off by threats."

"Not by death?"

"Why should death be more to me than to any other man?"

"You will surely be killed if you remain on the pony trail. There are those who wish you dead, but there are others who do not wish to take your life, and that alone has saved you; you have been in the power of the Night Riders when you little dreamed that you were, but have been spared."

"I guess they knew I had no treasure on that run."

"No, they spared you because there was one who did not wish you killed."

"Who is he?"

"I cannot tell."

"Or will not."

"Have it so; but do you refuse to leave the trail?"

"Yes."

"I have done my duty, so you must take the consequences."

"So be it, and only that you came to me with hands



up, I'd take you in, pard, or you could get me, just as it happened to turn out."

"We will not quarrel, Buffalo Bill, and I knew I could trust you when I placed myself in your power, for, see, I am unarmed.

"I have warned you, and you do not heed, so I have no more to say."

"Thanks for the warning, pard, but I knew what was before me when I became a pony rider, and threats do not scare me off. Good-by and maybe I'll have a chance to do you a good turn some day."

## CHAPTER V.

### A FAIR PASSENGER.

"Then, from your accounts, driver, all the men out on this border are wicked?"

"Yas, miss, all of us, more or less wicked, some of us not so bad as others, but none of us saints, though there do be men here as would die for a pard, give their last cent to one as was suffering for food, kill a man for insultin' a woman, and never back down ag'in' any odds, never lie or steal, nor——"

"Hold on, driver, for you are making a saint out of one of your sinners, for to do what you say, one must be noble and good indeed."

"But, then they is rough with it all, miss."

"Who, for instance, is a man such as you describe—sinner, yet saint?"

"Well, miss, in the camp to which you is going, I have in mind several men sich as I speak of.

"Now, Alf Slade, the division chief, hain't no saint, but he's true as steel to friend or foe, generous, and his word goes fer gospel in these parts.

"Then thar' is Buffalo Bill."

"I have heard of him."

"I guess so, for he's done brave deeds enough to be known."

"What of him?"

"In the first place, he's as handsome as a picter', and put up like a thoroughbred racer.

"He's peaceful as a lamb, too, but handy with a gun when it's needed, and they say—and many believes it—he has a charmed life, for no Injun or outlaw has been able to down him.

"He'd give his life for a friend, and I has heard that

he came out here to ride pony express, where pay is big, to take care of his mother and sisters, and he sends his money home as he 'arns it.

"I has knowed him to sit up all night and nurse a poor devil as got shot bad and then ride express the next day and not mind it."

"Well, how is he bad?"

"He hain't bad, only, as I said a while ago, he'd be called bad because he had to kill men along in the way of duty, and so I says we is all a bad lot, take us as you pleases."

"I don't believe you, for I am sure you are not bad."

"I ought not ter be, miss, for my good mother shaped my way right when I was a lad; but I've got hard since them days, and I gambles, drinks heavy when not drivin', an' has helped along the graveyards in my small way, miss."

"That means you have killed men?"

"Had to, miss—just had to."

"In self-defense, I suppose?"

"Well, yes, miss, and when a man was trying to cheat me at cards, hold me up fer a fool, and sich—it all goes, yer know, miss, and nobody calls me Saint Matthew—you know my name is Matthew Wright—Matt Wright fer short, always Wright if I am wrong," and the driver of the overland coach, then rolling along for Rocky Ridge, laughed at what he considered a good joke.

His companion laughed, too, and replied:

"I don't believe you and your comrades are half as bad as you paint them, Driver Matt, and I am sorry you do not go on to Julesburg to see how well I will get on with these Western terrors, as you make them out."

"I am sorry, too, miss, but my run ends at Rocky Ridge, though I used to drive the Julesburg trail."

"Do you know any one in the Julesburg camps by the name of Rathburn?"

"Rathburn—Hart Rathburn?"

"Yes, Hart Rathburn?"

"Does I know him, miss?"

"Yes."

"Well, I'll jist tell yer ef it wasn't for Hart Rathburn I'd not be drivin' stage now."

"Why not?"

"Dead men don't drive coaches, miss—at least, not on earthly trails, whatever they might do in heaven."



"Did Hart Rathburn save you from being killed?"

"I'll tell you he just did.

"Yer see, it were on this very run, and he were ridin' pony express as he is now.

"I had been held up by ther road-agents, and I had a rich cargo aboard.

"Thet I were going to lose all, and my life, too, were settled, for ther chief owed me a grudge fer drivin' him out of ther gold camps, and he told his men ter hang me.

"They were pleased ter do it, and, more interested in that then in gittin' ther treasure, they had put a rope about my neck when, suddenly, the tramp o' horses was heerd back on the trail, and I shouted out:

"Go on with yer funeral, pards! It's only cavalry from ther fort!"

"And I thought it was, and so did they, for they ran off to git ther horses.

"They had hardly got out of sight when up came the cavalry, and, Lord bless yer pretty face, miss, it was ther horses of ther road agents, twenty of 'em, druv along by Hart Rathburn, ther pony rider!

"He had suspected trouble, was on his run, was flankin' ther trail, and, seein' their horses, he tuk back an' started them on ther jump ter skeer ther outlaws, and you bet he did!

"Git on yer box, Matt, and drive like ther devil!" he yelled ter me, which same I did, and saved my treasure and life, leavin' ther outlaws on foot, though they did fire at us.

"That's what Hart Rathburn did for me, miss."

"And Hart Rathburn is my own brother. I am going out to see him now," was the information which his fair passenger gave Matt Wright.

Matt Wright was known upon the Overland as a square man, and an all-around good fellow.

He had driven stage for years, and his faults could be set down as two—drinking and gambling.

Several times he had amassed considerable wealth, and had started for the home of his boyhood, but would get upon a spree, squander all, and have to return to work again.

When on duty Matt never drank. He was wont to gamble in his idle hours, but never touched liquor until a longing came over him it seemed which he could not resist.

Then he would give up his place, and take a few weeks off for a carousal.

"It's a weakness, I own up; but it's nature, and on can't go ag'in' nature. I'll never be different, and there are the good people at home hoping for me to come back some day a great man.

"It's a thorn in my side, but I suffers ther most," he would say to his particular pards.

He had found Rita Rathburn awaiting his coach at the end of his run, and her beauty of face and form had at once struck him, while he wondered what had brought such a woman alone out into the wilds of the far West.

"Some officer's darter goin' out to one of ther forts," was his decision regarding her.

Rita Rathburn was beautiful, for hers was a face to see and not forget; hers a form the perfection of grace.

Dressed in a plain gray traveling suit, she wore a soft hat that was very becoming, and her little hands were sheltered by gauntlet gloves.

She had slung around her shoulder a leather satchel which she kept close by her, Matt Wright observed.

When she mounted to the box she did so with the easy swing of an athlete. She had asked to drive, and when she took the reins Matt's eyes opened, for he saw that she was a skillful driver.

As they went on their way, there being no one else on the coach, they became right good friends, Matt Wright and his fair passenger, and when, at last, it became known that Hart Rathburn was her brother, the driver was delighted.

Then he said, in a serious way:

"But what takes you out to Julesburg, miss?"

"To see my brother."

"I don't wonder that you wants ter see him, for he's a fine fellow; but then, it hain't no place for sich as you be, miss."

"I'll get used to it, and like it."

"I guess not. It's too tough and rough for that. I was hopin' you was a officer's daughter out at the fort; it wouldn't be so bad; but out in a wild camp you will find it too mighty rough for a young and pretty girl like you."

Rita Rathburn flushed under the compliment, but said:



"I was born in a frontier fort and reared amid the scenes of a wild life, so it will seem like old times to me.

"Besides, in spite of what you say of the men out here, they are not so bad, only rough diamonds, save a few outlawed wretches who may be beyond reclaim."

"Well, miss, this is the place to find all kinds, and many a man out here is dodging the gallows and the jail, and, having begun wrong, they keep up their bad life when they come West.

"I am sorry you is coming out here to stay, as you tells me, for you'll see sights your pretty eyes shouldn't look on.

"It's time we was meeting the Pony Rider out o' Wild Waters, miss, for he's allers on time, but late to-day.

"I hope he hain't been held up by ther Night Riders, for he goes in over this run at night, and they works only by night."

"And do they trouble you much, sir?"

"At times they plays the deuce with us, and the passengers and freight, but I hopes we won't see 'em to-night."

"I hope so."

"As Rita Rathburn spoke she saw that darkness was falling fast, and the driver had told her that it was yet ten miles to Wild Waters, and that Rocky Ridge was still double that distance further on.

It seemed to Rita Rathburn that, with the darkness, the trail grew worse, and Matt Wright relapsed into silence, devoting his whole attention to managing his team.

At last they entered some heavy timber, and all about them was pitchy darkness, but Matt Wright held on as though he had the eyes of a cat, and Rita Rathburn was just about to ask him how he could see to drive, when, sharply on the night air broke the command:

"Halt, Matt Wright, by command of the Night Riders!"

"We is done for!" moaned the driver, as he put his foot hard down upon the brake and reined in his team at the same time.

## CHAPTER VI.

### DOING DOUBLE DUTY.

Buffalo Bill made his ride in safety, in spite of the warning of the night rider who intercepted him on the trail.

He reached the end of his run, received the return pouches from the pony rider arriving there, and started back to Julesburg.

Reaching Julesburg on schedule time, he was complimented by Alf Slade and again offered the position of assistant chief of division.

Again it was declined, and then Alf Slade said:

"Well, Cody, we will wait and see how your plot to entrap the Night Riders turns out and then, maybe, you'll accept."

"I think not, sir, but I hope to be successful in my hunt for the riders."

"You saw nothing of them on your last ride?"

"Oh, yes, sir," and Buffalo Bill told of the meeting with the masked man in black who had given him the warning.

"Well, they have surely given you fair warning; but I cannot understand just why they are so anxious to get you off the trail."

"Nor I, sir; for my place could easily be filled."

"I could put on another rider, for I am one to believe that no man lives whose place cannot be filled, though it would be hard to find your match, Cody.

"But there is some secret motive, I am sure, for these Night Riders wishing to get rid of you.

"If they desired to kill you they could do so, but instead they warn you—try, in fact, to drive you off the trail."

"And I won't be driven," said Buffalo Bill.

"I only wish, for your own sake, that you would heed the warning; but you know best.

"You saw Rathburn, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir; met him on his coach before he reached Rocky Ridge."

"And I sent Kane with him to go on to his post at Wild Waters."

"Yes, sir; he'll be there all right by my next ride. But how is Badman Bender, sir?"

"Improving slowly, Doc Stevens tells me."

"You must look out for him, sir, when he gets around again."

Alf Slade smiled as he replied:

"How about you, Cody?"

"Oh, I'll keep an eye on him, too."

"Do so, for he is even more bitter against you than he is toward me."



"Did the boys arrange for the coming of Rathburn's sister, sir?"

"Yes, they gave her your cabin, and all chipped in to fit it up in fine style, for I sent some things over.

"I had the men put up a cabin near, and I can tell you she will have a nice home of it for this part of the country, while the camps are wild about her coming, and I suppose Rathburn will find her at Rocky Ridge on his next run, and bring her home with him."

"Yes, sir, he expects to; but I'll go and see if I can do anything else to add to her comfort, and see Boss Betsy about taking care of her."

"That has already been done. Boss Betsy is in charge of the cabin.

"She will cook for Miss Rathburn, and help her all she can, but will keep her own cabin on the brook, which is not far away, you know, and continue to wash and sew for the boys, and turn an honest penny, as she calls it, thus making her fortune, for she is getting rich, Bill, being the only woman in camp. I hope she won't be jealous of Miss Rathburn."

Buffalo Bill laughed, for he had seen a photograph which Hart Rathburn had of his sister, and recalled the freckled face, red hair and athletic form the boys had nicknamed "Boss Betsy" from the fact that she had bossed her late husband and held the whole camp in subjection.

As Driver Drayton's wife and the only woman in camp, she had done well in taking in "washing and mending," but, as a lone widow she had doubled her charges and got all she asked.

Buffalo Bill was her favorite of all; his two special pards she was partial to; and she stood in awe of Alf Slade, but all the rest of the camp were as mere cattle to Boss Betsy.

Ugly she certainly was; in fact, Scott Kane was wont to say that her face pained her, it was so homely; but as the one woman in camp, she was regarded as a most superior being, and she made capital out of the fact.

When Buffalo Bill left headquarters he made his way over to his own cabin, to be amazed at the change there.

A fence had been built around it, enclosing an acre of land, which was bordered by the brook on one side.

Here, by the waters, in the shelter of the trees, a rustic arbor had been erected for the coming occupant of the snug little house.

Across the front of the cabin a rude piazza had been built, and the place looked very homelike from without.

Within, the place looked even more attractive, and Buffalo Bill was the more surprised at what had been done.

The men had all been determined to contribute something to adorn or be useful, and furs, birds' wings, mats and easy chairs were seen everywhere, with a hammock slung under the trees.

A hundred yards distant was the new and hastily erected cabin for the three pards, and Buffalo Bill went, after he had taken a look at the nest intended for Rita Rathburn, to see Boss Betsy.

"Ain't it grand, Bill, and won't she be comfortable?"

"I only hope she won't put on airs, for that I can't stand, and won't from an angel.

"Drayton, big as he was, never bossed me, and no woman shall," decidedly asserted the widow.

"Don't get a chip on your shoulder to welcome her, Betsy, for I believe you will like Miss Rathburn, unless you make up your mind beforehand not to do so, and in that case I will have Hart send to Rocky Ridge and get a woman, for there are several there, you know."

This quiet remark silenced Betsy, for she was in deadly fear of a rival in the "washing and mending" monopoly which she held, and she said quickly:

"Don't you fear, Bill; I'll treat her as though she were my own child."

And Buffalo Bill felt from that moment Betsy was no longer "boss."

Hart Rathburn came in on schedule time, though it was his first drive over the overland trail on a coach box.

He had nothing to report, brought in a load of passengers and had no accident or adventure.

"You are as good a driver as you are a pony rider, Rathburn," was Alf Slade's comment, and this praise meant a good deal from him.

With Buffalo Bill's aid Rathburn went to work making their cabin more comfortable, and adding a few finishing touches to the dwelling place of Rita Rathburn.

It looked so cozy and homelike that all the men in the camp asked to come over and have a peep at it, and there were more volunteers than were required to clear up the grounds and add to the general trim appearance of the surroundings.



By the last mail Hart Rathburn had received word from his sister that she would arrive by the next through coach, and so he expected to meet her at Rocky Ridge, and when it became known in the camp that the pony rider's sister would soon be with them, every man began to brush up for the occasion.

Buffalo Bill went out to the grave of Will Hope, the pony rider who had been the last victim of the Night Riders, and placed a bunch of wild flowers upon it as a token of his regard.

"Poor Hope would have done as much for me," he said to Hart Rathburn, who had also remembered his pony rider pard. In fact, the grave was simply hidden under wild flowers, the tribute of kind hearts, if rough hands.

The captain of the Pony Riders reported for duty on time, when he had to again go out on his run, and dashed away with the pouches brought in by his comrade of the trail.

The next morning Hart Rathburn mounted the box of the stage, and all the camp assembled to see him off and wish him success, for he was to bring his sister back with him, and each man was as much interested in her coming as though she was his own kin.

When Buffalo Bill arrived at Rocky Ridge he found that another pony rider had come to grief.

His horse had come on into camp, but riderless, and there were marks on his saddle that showed he had been down in the mud.

A party was ordered out at once in search of the missing courier, and the poor fellow was found dead by the side of the trail, a bullet wound in his side.

He had been fired upon, wounded, but kept his saddle until his, evidently hard-rushed horse over a bit of rugged and slippery road, had fallen and rolled over him.

Unhurt, the horse had sprung to his feet and gone on, and the rider, crushed by the fall, had lain there in the trail and breathed his last, his pouches lying near him.

With the rider dead, and miles from the station, no one else there to take his place, Buffalo Bill at once volunteered for double duty, and went on with the express bags, a ride of eighty-five miles further.

But his form was as hard as iron and his sinews like steel; he could stand any amount of hardship, lose night

after night of sleep, and so he did not shrink from the task, or even hesitate.

Leaving the party to return with the dead pony rider, and with a sigh for another comrade gone, Buffalo Bill dashed away upon the task he had set for himself to accomplish.

His own run was a hundred and ten miles and return, with seven changes of horses, and over the wildest, most rugged part of the long trail, while it was also the more dangerous, having been proven by far the most fatal to riders and stage drivers, both from the deeds of outlaws and Indians.

To this ride of two hundred and twenty miles, with the return considered, he was to add eighty-five miles more going, and as much returning, making in all, without rest, a continuous ride of three hundred and ninety miles with twenty changes of horses.

As half of the distance was to be covered at night, and the trail led over mountain and plain, through canyon and valley, across streams and through a land haunted with danger, the reader can see that the daring captain of the Pony Riders had cut out for himself a most gigantic task.

Nor was this to be all that Buffalo Bill had to face upon this memorable ride, for he was flying along on his run to Wild Waters when he drew rein with a sudden-frenzy that threw his horse upon his haunches, while a whistle of surprise was given at a discovery he had made by one quick glance at the trail he was pursuing.

## CHAPTER VII.

### BUFFALO BILL'S DISCOVERY.

The discovery made by Buffalo Bill was the tracks of shod horses, going toward a ridge, and some dozen in number.

Coming from the mountains, they could but be foes, and the animals being shod showed that they were not redskins.

Night Riders, then, they must be, and their way led to the stage trail a mile to the right, for just there the pony trail was making a cut to save several miles.

The stage trail passed through a gap in the mountains, that led into a valley, and it must be that the outlaws were on their way to head off the stage and hold it up.



Of course, it was important to push on with the pony express matter, but Buffalo Bill had been told that the coming stage to Rocky Ridge was bearing a rich bilge in funds to pay off the Pony Riders, drivers and to other men employed by the company.

This meant a large sum of money, and it was being sent through first while it was given out that the company's paymaster was to come by the next coach, so, if he held up, he would have nothing to be robbed of.

This secret had been divulged to Buffalo Bill by the agent at Rocky Ridge.

But the pony rider captain knew that there was another valuable freight on the coming coach—Rita Rathburn.

At least, her letter to her brother said she would come by that coach.

Matt Wright, the driver, Buffalo Bill knew well and liked.

If the pony express matter was somewhat delayed, he must try to save the company's money, Rita Rathburn and Matt Wright.

How to do so was the question.

First he would examine the situation.

So he turned off the beaten pony trail, and rode on after the one that he could readily follow, and which was so fresh he knew it had been made within a couple of hours.

As he drew near the stage trail, he went more cautiously.

Fortunately, he was sheltered by heavy timber. Approaching as near as he dared to the trail, he dismounted, hitched his horse, and went along on foot.

He walked with great caution, for he knew his danger if he came upon the outlaws suddenly.

He had gone but a short distance when he beheld horses feeding ahead.

They were staked out, their bridles off, but saddles on.

Where were their riders?

There were just twelve horses, and Buffalo Bill saw that one was a pack animal.

The men must be in the gap.

The coach, however, was not due for a couple of hours or more, so Cody began to climb the hill.

He decided to reach the range, look over in the gap, discover just where the outlaws were ambushed, then go back to his horse, ride around by the pony trail, head

the coach off, give warning, and have Matt Wright leave the stage, mount his passenger or passengers on the horses, and take the pony trail and flank the ambushed outlaws in the ambush, carrying his treasure with him.

But when Buffalo Bill crept cautiously to the edge of the precipice and looked over, to his surprise he did not see the outlaws in ambush.

He searched all about, and, failing to find them, he began to look for a position from which he could view the trail running through the valley.

At last he got a place from which to scan the long, narrow, but pretty, valley.

"Ah! there they are!"

He had discerned a group of men in the edge of a pretty grove of pines in the valley.

The stage trail ran through the center of this grove, and the bandits had preferred to ambush in there, as, if there was a guard with the coach, they would be on the watch for foes at the gap, but not at the pines in the valley a mile, nearly, away from the range.

They had left their horses beyond the range and gone to the pines on foot, and the pony rider captain muttered:

"I'll try another game, and one that Hart Rathburn once played—that is, capture their horses, and then warn Matt of his danger.

"But suppose they left a guard with their horses? I must go slow."

With this he retraced his way down the ridge, and after some difficulty obtained a view of the horses of the outlaws.

As he was looking the situation carefully over, he beheld a man lying on a blanket near the horses.

Buffalo Bill calmly looked the matter over as he stood on the ridge gazing at the outlaws' horses and their guard, apparently asleep on his post.

If he had been in any doubt as to who the riders of those horses were this had been dispelled by noting that each animal was jet black, as were also their saddles.

"I have thus far lost just twenty-five minutes, and if on time, the stage will be at the pines in two hours at furthest.

"Night is coming on, and I think my best plan would be to take the pony trail back to Wild Waters, after I have captured yonder guard and the horses, and get the



aid of Scott Kane and his assistant, with the horses there, for a dozen outlaws will not be so easy to drive away from a treasure they deem within their grasp.

"By hard riding I can reach Wild Waters in half an hour, and an hour can get us back behind the coach and make the outlaws believe we are a guard of cavalry.

"Now for it!"

With this, Buffalo Bill rapidly descended the ridge, and when he got into the valley he knew he had to take his chances of being discovered.

There might be two guards over the horses, or, if not the one might get up from his blanket and discover him.

The horses, seeing him, might neigh, or otherwise arouse the guard.

The Pony Riders rode as lightly armed as possible, and Buffalo Bill carried only one revolver.

The guard, or guards, as the case might be, would surely have rifles.

This placed the pony rider at a great disadvantage.

Aroused, through whatever means, the guard, being armed with a rifle, would be able to open upon Buffalo Bill before the latter was within range.

"I must make strategy serve me if he discovers me," decided the wary rider, as he left the range and boldly walked toward the scattering timber where the recumbent form of the guard was visible.

There was no need of caution now, only so much as to make no sound to arouse the guard, so Buffalo Bill walked erect and with a firm step, his hand ready to grasp his revolver.

His express pouches he had concealed near where he left his horse.

Nearer and nearer he drew to the form on the blanket, and he saw now that it was clothed in black.

The sable slouch hat lay by him, and the face was masked.

When within a hundred feet of the man, Buffalo Bill paused, and looked all about to see if there was another guard.

To his relief, he saw none.

As he continued to advance one of the horses, as often is the case, discovered him, gave a startled snort, and trotted to the end of his stake rope.

This caused the others to throw up their heads and sound an alarm.

And more, it brought the sleeping guard to his feet with a bound.

He rubbed his eyes and gazed hurriedly about him.

It was at long range for a revolver, but Buffalo Bill would not fire until the guard showed fight; he would try strategy to get nearer.

Suddenly the guard discovered the prowler, and the discovery was a startling one, for he uttered a cry of alarm and sprang with great leaps toward a tree some rods away, where Buffalo Bill now saw a rifle leaning.

The guard must not reach that rifle, for the terms would be too unequal if he did.

So Buffalo Bill fired a quick shot at the running man.

The bullet hit his leg and knocked him down, but the man was upon his feet in an instant, and made another attempt to spring for the rifle, but his foot would not allow of it, and seizing his revolver from his belt he now turned upon the pony rider.

"Hands up, pard, or I fire," shouted Buffalo Bill.

The response was a shot, and the bullet came dangerously near the pony rider's head.

The shot was answered with surprising quickness, and the aim was true, for the night rider fell in a heap on the ground.

Though Buffalo Bill saw his man fall, and had perfect confidence in his own aim, he approached cautiously.

He had seen men supposed to be dead prove dangerously very suddenly.

It had been his wish not to kill the man, to wound and take him prisoner.

But he had proven so dangerous he did not dare to trust him too far, so had fired to bring him down.

Still, he had hoped not to have him die at once, for he might get a confession—a thing greatly to be desired.

Thus far most of the Night Riders brought down had been killed outright, though there had been several exceptions that proved how well the band was organized and disciplined.

One man, wounded seriously, when his foes approached him, turned his last shot upon himself, thus ending his own life.

Another had died with sealed lips, refusing to tell of his comrades.

A third, captured unhurt, had been hanged, refusing to the last to betray the band to save his life.

Still, Buffalo Bill, though knowing all this, had hoped



that one man might do what another would refuse, and had been anxious to keep from killing the guard if he could do so.

When he reached the man he turned him over upon his back and took from his face the black mask.

He was not dead.

"Well, comrade, I am sorry I had to fire to kill," said the pony rider, with real sympathy in his tone.

He saw that the man was conscious, for he looked bony straight in the eye.

"I would have killed you."

"Who are you?"

"A night rider."

"Where are your comrades?"

"I will not tell."

"Will you die and make no confession to remove the guilt from your conscience?"

"Yes."

"You are dying."

"I know it."

"I wish I could help you."

"You cannot."

Buffalo Bill hardly knew what to do.

He must not let the coach be held up, and yet he disliked to leave the dying outlaw.

But he felt his duty was to the company he served rather than to the man who had warred against it, though he was now dying.

Night was coming on, and the outlaws in the pines might have heard the shots, though he did not think so.

"Pard, I will make you as comfortable here as I can, and leave you, but later will send aid to you, for I must go on my way."

"I am sorry, but it must be so."

Buffalo Bill had hoped that the man would try and detain him, seek to make some confession, after all; instead, he merely said:

"Go; do not mind me, I have brought this upon myself."

Buffalo Bill put out his hand.

The outlaw had not strength to raise his, but tried to do so.

The pony rider stooped and grasped his, and then placed him in as comfortable a position as he could.

Near him he left his revolver, to keep off a coyote.

Then he again grasped his hand, and in silence turned away.

Taking the rifle from the tree, Buffalo Bill then mounted the best of the horses, tied the others two by two, and drove them back on the trail he had come.

Reaching his own horse, he took his saddle and express pouches, and at once set the horses into a rapid run.

This was kept up until the pony trail was reached.

Then he hitched the horses, and upon his own animal went speeding along at a tremendous pace back to Wild Waters.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### A STRANGE CAVALCADE.

It was growing dark, but the horse knew the trail and soon covered the distance, and dashed up to the station of Wild Waters, where Scott Kane was now stock tender.

The latter came out, rifle in hand, much surprised at the sudden appearance. His comrade was just behind him.

"Ho, Bill! you back?"

"Yes, and not a moment to lose. You and Roper Dick arm yourselves; you, Scott, bring your bugle; get my horse in the corral and come with me, for we can save Matt Wright's coach from ambush.

"Don't lose a minute, for we cannot spare the time. Matt carries treasure, and you know Hart Rathburn's sister is along on this run."

The two men did not take a minute to arm themselves, and while they got the herd of horses together, Buffalo Bill saddled the two they were to ride.

In just six minutes the three men were off to the rescue of the coach, the horses' hoofs echoing loudly as they sped along.

Buffalo Bill fully realized that he had to act quickly, that if the coach was held up, Matt Wright might be killed, perhaps some of the passengers, if there were any others than Rita Rathburn, and the treasure taken and people robbed.

The outlaws worked quickly and well when at their lawless deeds, and would very soon carry out their bold intention to rob, perhaps to kill, so he and his comrades had not a moment to lose.



The horses of the outlaws were found where Buffalo Bill left them, and with those brought from the station, were driven on at a run, forming a large cavalcade.

They were urged on along the pony trail for miles, and after nearly an hour of hard riding, came to where it once more entered the stage trail.

There a short halt was made, and Buffalo Bill, dismounting, quickly lighted a match, and, with Scott Kane, searched the ground thoroughly.

They were not long in finding what they sought, for there were the fresh tracks of the wheels and horses.

The stage had passed, just how long before they could only guess.

They had no time to lose.

It might be then nearing the ambushade in the pines.

"Now, pards, I have not been able to tell you just why I came for you and what I wish," said Buffalo Bill.

"Start the horses on ahead, and we'll ride together, and I'll give you my plan."

"All right, pard Bill, we are with you, whatever is to be done," said Scott Kane.

"Yes, shout and we obeys," added Roper Dick, Scott Kane's assistant at the station, and a good all-around fellow.

The horses were started ahead once more, on the jump, but now tied with lariats, four abreast, as the stage trail allowed of their so going.

Thus they looked like a company of cavalry riding in fours, and were thirty riderless animals.

"Pards, I came upon a trail crossing the pony path near Rocky Ridge and I investigated.

"There are just eleven Night Riders ambushed in Park Valley, in the grove of pines near the center.

"They left their horses the other side of the gap at Rocky Ridge, and with one guard, so I corraled them, and that accounts for the animals I have along.

"And the guard, Bill?" asked Kane.

"We had a couple of shots, and I left him badly wounded, and you must see to him, Scott, for I go on at once on my trail as soon as we have blocked the game.

"Eleven, you say?" asked Roper Dick.

"Yes, and we are three; but we will make them believe we are half a hundred, with the horses we have.

"That is why I asked Scott to bring his cornet, for he can give a bugle call or two, and we will stampede the riders whether they have already held up the coach or not.

"When we get near the pine grove we can charge at the call of the bugle, and riding in front of our troop of horses, we can open fire, but be careful not to aim toward the coach.

"All we wish is to stampede the Night Riders, and then Matt can drive on and you can accompany him.

"As we will have the outlaws' horses, they will be on foot, and make their escape as best they can.

"When you get through the gap look up the man wounded, and carry him in the coach to the station, but I think you'll find him dead, as he was falling faint when I left.

"Now, on to the rescue!" and Buffalo Bill urged his horse to a still fleet pace.

But now to return to the coach, which had already been halted.

As he drove along on his way with Rita Rathburn in the box with him, Matt Wright had not once forgotten the danger of the trail.

He had only hoped that he would get through on the run without a halt, for he realized that a hold-up would prove a great shock to his fair passenger.

Aware that he was carrying a large sum of money and knowing the plot for the paymaster to come by the next coach, and so try to prevent being robbed, Matt Wright hoped that the scheme might work successfully.

But he was doubtful, and the gap in Rocky Ridge was what he feared.

If he got through there without a hold-up, then he had hopes of going on all right.

It was then a surprise to him when he heard the command to halt, in the pines in the valley, a mile before he reached the gap.

Not for a moment, daring as he was, would he have then attempted to dash through, as he had several times done, for fear of bringing a shot that might wound or kill his fair passenger on the box.

When the challenge came he at once understood what was expected of him, and never in his life had he halted with greater promptness.

"Sh! Don't say a word to let 'em know you is a woman, or they might want yer fer ransom," he warningly whispered.

But his foot was on the brake, his strong hands had drawn hard on the lines, and the team had come to a quick halt.

In the darkness the shadowy forms of the outlaws were seen.

Approaching the coach on the side on which the driver sat was the tall form of the chief.

"Good-evening, Mr. Wright," he said, pleasantly, as he halted and looked up at the driver, his mask being seen even in the darkness.

"I doesn't call it a good evening when I'm held up by a lot o' men who ought ter be hanged," boldly responded Matt.

"Don't get cross, for it will do no good, and you know we must live."

"By stealin' other folks' goods; but yer'll git nothin' fer yer trouble this time, so take that for a pointer."



"beg to differ from you," replied the outlaw leader. "Yes, we does differ, for if I was like you, I'd be a roat and thief, too."

"Don't get cross, I say, Matt, but tell me what freight passengers you carry," and the leader seemed undisturbed by the insulting words of the driver.

"I has one paseenger, no freight to speak of, and I'll get nothing to-night, for the paymaster you hoped for didn't come on this run."

"You both lie and tell the truth, Matt, for the paymaster is not along, though I happen to know that his name is, for I take it the lady passenger you have, and she is bound to some one of the forts, is carrying it enough for him."

"You is away off this time."

"Seeing will be believing."

"I expected you would have an escort, and so I condescended to hold you up here, instead of in the gap, for we didn't let you go by if there was a guard with you, and your presence not be suspected here."

"Our horses are in hiding beyond the gap, and so we will ride on there with you. But, come, I want that sure you carry, and as this lady is doubtless an official's wife, she must have baggage of value along, jewels and other things worth taking, while a good ransom would be paid for her, so I shall hold her a captive and make the demand for money to buy her release."

"You see, this is a good night for me, Mr. Wright, though you do not seem to enjoy it."

"The tone of the outlaw leader was politely sarcastic, and every word he uttered fell heavily upon the heart of Matt Wright and Rita Rathburn."

"See here, Cap'n Kit, fer that's what they calls yer, yer don't dare let yer own name be known, I wants to ask yer, as a man, ef yer has any manhood left in yer, does yer intend ter take this leddy a prisoner jist for a leetle gold yer'd git out o' it?" asked Matt Wright indignantly.

"I am out for gold, Matt! Wright, by fair or foul means, and if it can be gotten from a woman I will get it."

"Yes, she will be my prisoner until she can buy her freedom, so that is all there is of it," was the response of the road-agent chief.

"Well, I has heered many hard things said of yer, but I blamed ef yer hain't meaner than any man I knows." "Come, no more talk or I'll silence your tongue for good."

"You've got treasure aboard, as I know, and your passenger is worth more, and I want, and will have, all I can get."

"Hand over that money-box, Matt Wright, and you, sirs, must dismount and go with me."

"Oh, sir, will not you take my word for my ransom?"

"No; possession is nine points of the law, and you will have to remain a hostage until the money is paid."

"Come, Wright, delay a minute longer, and I will kill you. Out with that treasure, for I know you have it along."

"There was nothing for it but to obey, and none knew it better than brave Matt Wright."

The passenger would be held, the coach robbed of its treasure, and delay would cause the death of the driver.

But just as the outlaws gathered more closely around the coach, there came to the ears of Matt Wright a sound that made him start.

He was elevated above the others, and he heard the fall of many hoofs coming along at a swinging pace.

He did not wish the outlaws to hear the welcome sound until the rescuers were nearer, for he was sure that a company of soldiers must be near.

So Matt talked in a loud tone, called out to his horses, as though they were restive, and whispered to Rita Rathburn:

"Cry like ther deuce, miss, fer help is near, and I don't want 'em ter hear it!"

Rita Rathburn had not heard the sound, but she obeyed, and burst into feigned tears and sobbed, enough to touch a heart of stone.

"Say, pard outlaw cap'n, I s'pose I has ter yield ter yer demand—ho, thar, you critters!—as long as I can't help myself, and I'll tell yer thet you've made a rich haul. And—ho, thar! what's the matter with you critters? Oh, glory!"

The last two words were uttered with a yell, for suddenly was heard, back on the trail, the wild call of a bugle.

It was a terrible surprise to the outlaws, for now they all heard the quick fall of many hoofs, almost upon them, and the notes of the bugle rose wilder and wilder.

"Form fours! charge!" shouted a commanding voice, and the frightened outlaws waited for no more.

They were on foot, a mile from where they had left their horses; the sound of hoofs indicated a troop of cavalry coming! Resistance would be madness; the only chance for safety would be flight and hiding in the pines.

In his mad rage the chief fired twice upward.

Had his purpose been to kill Matt Wright, and was the second shot for the woman as well?

Whatever his motive, he came very near killing both Rita Rathburn and the driver, for one bullet passed through her hat, the other grazed the head of Matt Wright, inflicting a slight wound in the scalp.

The driver threw his revolver forward to return the fire, but checked himself, as he feared a volley would be returned from the flying outlaws that might kill Rita.

He did not think of himself.



Another moment, and every outlaw had disappeared in the shadows of the pines on the right, for in that direction they could keep under cover across the valley, reach the hills, and get to the spot where they had left their horses, and which they had no idea they would not find there.

Then up dashed the rescuers, and, to his utter amazement, Matt Wright instead of beholding a troop of cavalry, beheld a number of riderless horses, and but three men!

The cavalcade came to a halt by the coach, and, in the darkness, Matt Wright could not recognize the three rescuers, but one said quickly:

"Drive on, Matt, for they have no horses to pursue you with. Kane will explain. I must be off. Good-night!"

The speaker wheeled his horse and dashed away in the darkness.

It was the captain of the Pony Riders—Buffalo Bill.

## CHAPTER IX.

### RITA'S STORY.

"We is rescued, miss," said the driver, exultantly, as he drove on.

"Yes, and it appears to have been a most remarkable rescue," replied Rita Rathburn.

"Just like Buffalo Bill does things, miss."

"And the man who rode away so quickly was my brother's friend, Buffalo Bill?"

"Yes, miss."

"He said but little, and did not even give us a chance to thank him."

"That's his way, miss."

"He is modest, like all brave men."

"Just as modest as a school gal, miss."

"But, why did he leave?"

"You see, he is ridin' pony express, and war behind on his time."

"He, like as not, found the Night Riders was out for blood and went back and got Scott and played it on them, for they fooled me, as I thought it were a troop of cavalry."

"There was a bugler there, and a good one."

"That's Kane, for he plays ther cornet, and he plays it good, too."

"We'll know it all when we gits to ther station, which Kane has charge of now."

On through the valley drove Matt, keeping his horses at a brisk pace and talking as he went.

"Kane is one of yer brother's pards, miss, for he and Buffalo Bill and pard Rathburn lives tergether, as I told yer."

"Bill, he is still ridin' pony express, but Kane is

stock tender now at Wild Waters, which we is to, and yer brother takes the coach on when I le at Rocky Ridge."

"I shall be glad to meet my brother's friends, thank them for their great service to me to-night."

"I don't jist know why Buffalo Bill are ridin' run to-night, for he belongs on ther trail from Waters on to Julesburg, but, maybe, ther regula hez been kilt."

"Poor fellows, they are in constant dread of de you also are, Mr. Wright."

"Now, don't call me mister, for it don't go ou I'm plain Matt Wright and don't claim no titles."

"All right; we are good enough friends, I thin will call you Matt."

"Matt goes, miss. Yas, Scott, what is it?" and answered a call from Kane.

"Halt after passing through the gap, for I've wounded man, or a dead one, for you to carry thro."

"O. K. I'll freight him through, living or d he's your friend, pard Kane."

On through the gap the coach rolled, and beyo the scattering timber, Matt halted.

It was bright starlight, and the clouds had away, so the night was not very dark.

Scott Kane and Roper Dick at once tied the dr horses, and, mounted upon their own animals, bega search for the wounded outlaw.

Following Buffalo Bill's directions, it was not before Kane found the spot, and he saw the form beneath the tree where Cody had left him.

"Come, Dick, here he is," he called out to Dick, who was a hundred yards distant, and the heard his call and waited.

"Say, pard, are you all right?" asked Kane, approached.

No reply came, and, stepping forward, he bent the motionless form.

"Dead," he muttered, as he placed his hand upo head, now with the icy chill of death upon it.

"Ho, Matt, drive over here, please."

Matt did so, halting the coach near.

Kane had wrapped the body in the blanket, and out:

"Pard Matt, he's dead, and I'm going to ask yo carry the body on to the station, and I'll bury it."

"Certain."

"Who is he?"

"A night rider."

"Good! He's all right. Who kilt him?"

"Buffalo Bill and left him here wounded, whil came for us to help save the coach from the riders. held you up."

"But I'll explain when I get to the station, for



hustle away from here as they will come after us."

A blanket-enveloped form was placed in the coach, and at a brisk pace Matt drove on once more, the two following with their horses.

Waters was reached without further trouble, six fresh horses left in the corral were brought and replaced the team that had just come in.

Heing Roper Dick to see to the changing of the Scott Kane started to explain to Matt just how he had been rescued, when the latter said:

"Sit and tell it to my passenger, too, for I've got the sweetest little ledgy along you ever seen, and it's Rita Rathburn's sister. Come over to her coach and I'll show you."

"I'm glad, indeed, you were able to serve Hart's and we knew she was expected through on your part, Matt, and Buffalo Bill and all of us were that anxious to save you."

"And you did," and approaching the coach, Matt con-

cluded, "this is one of your brother's pardners, Scott Kane, I spoke to you about, and he's proud to meet you. I'll introduce him."

"Indeed, I am glad to meet you, Miss Rathburn, and your brother will take you on from Rocky Ridge."

"She swung herself down from the box with the easy manner of an athlete and, grasping Kane's hand, said, lightly:

"You have nobly served me, Mr. Kane, and from my heart I thank you and your brave friend, whom I wish to know."

"Roper Dick will soon be here, miss, but we were anxious to an end, for Buffalo Bill deserves all the credit."

"I have no doubt that he also deserves my thanks, and will prove my appreciation when I see him."

"He deserves all, Miss Rathburn, for he is doing his duty."

"He went through, Matt, on this run, as the rider was, and so is taking the ride on from here."

An hour after he left he was back again, had me get my horses up, and we started at full speed to flank the outlaw and come in behind you on the trail."

"It seems Bill discovered the outlaws' trail, followed them and their horses under a guard, wounded him, left him there, and, finding where the band was ambushed, came back for us to help him."

"We had the horses of the riders also, for Buffalo Bill captured them, and we played cavalry and so stampeded your enemies."

"Bill told me to carry my cornet along, and when the outlaws were driven off he went on his run, and a hard job he'll have of it, enough to kill any other man."

"He'll make it all right, never fear, and get in on

time, I'll bet big money," said Matt Wright, with enthusiasm.

"I'll never bet against Buffalo Bill, Matt; but here comes Roper Dick and Miss Rathburn wishes to meet him."

Roper Dick was duly presented, and Rita Rathburn won his heart by warmly grasping his hand and thanking him.

The fresh team was now ready, and as the body of the dead outlaw had been removed from the coach, Scott Kane suggested that Rita Rathburn ride inside and get what sleep she could.

"No, indeed! I'll not desert my good comrade, Matt," she replied. "I will ride on the box as before," and, with a good-by, she swung herself up with the same ease with which she had descended.

Matt was delighted at her decision, and away the coach started once more to make a rapid drive to Rocky Ridge and make up for the time that had been lost through the hold-up by the Night Riders.

It was midnight when the coach drew rein at the Overland tavern, in Rocky Ridge, and standing in the light of the open doorway was revealed the tall form of Hart Rathburn.

"There is my brother," cried Rita. "I never saw him in that garb before, but I know that it is he."

"Yes, miss it's your brother, and he's just a lookin' fer you with all his eyes."

As the coach halted Hart Rathburn stood by its side, and in another moment he had welcomed his sister.

"Hart!"

"Rita!"

It was all they said, but the heart of each was full, and Matt Wright felt a lump in his throat and brushed tears from his eyes which he could not force back.

As Rita turned she saw those tears glistening in the light and said:

"You have brought me safely through, good friend, and you know how I appreciate it."

Matt could not reply, but wrung the tiny hand in his palm in silence.

"Yes, Matt, old pard, you have brought my sister to me, and I must also thank you; but did you have any trouble?"

"Well, I kinder reckon we did, and ef it hedn't been fer Buffalo Bill—God bless him—we'd not be here—at least, yer sister wouldn't, and somethin' I carries, too, and you has ter take on through, so look out fer trouble yerself, as yer knows them Night Riders when they is dead sure thar is gold ter git, makes two or three attempts at it, by dividin' their band and hittin' all along ther trail."

"That is so, Matt, and thank you for the warning."

"You have the paymaster's box along?"



"Yas, and yer sister, so look out for trouble," was the whispered warning.

Hart Rathburn slightly changed color at the warning of Matt Wright.

He recalled that the outlaws when pretty sure that a coach or a pony rider carried a valuable freight, were almost certain to make two, if not three, attempts to get the booty before it got to its destination, just as Matt Wright had said.

They would divide their band in two or three parties, and strike at as many points on the trail, so if one missed another might be more successful in securing the booty, as the drivers often used strategy to save their treasure and passengers from robbery.

That they knew of the paymaster's strong box being aboard was certain from what Matt Wright told him of his hold-up, and a second, if not a third, effort to rob the coach Hart Rathburn felt morally sure would be attempted.

For himself he did not fear, but then he had his sister along, and after a talk with Matt he decided to leave her at Rocky Ridge until the next run of his coach.

But when this plan was told to her, Rita Rathburn would not hear of it.

"I will not dodge any danger you have to face, Hart, and you should know me better than to ask me to do so.

"I go through with you on this run, or take the consequences," was the bold reply of Rita Rathburn.

Hart knew his sister, and said no more.

Supper was eaten at Rocky Ridge, a fresh team put to the coach, and Rita mounted the box by the side of her brother.

Matt Wright said good-by with a sad cadence in his voice, and saw the coach drive away with a foreboding of evil.

"I don't think they'll hold her up afore daylight, but—I only wishes I could do something to help Hart and his sister out, but I don't just see what it can be."

With this he sighed and went to his quarters.

Although anxious as to the result, Hart Rathburn did not wish to show it to his sister, and as soon as they were well on the way he said, cheerily:

"Well, sister, I'm more than happy to see you, though it is not the best place I have to welcome you to."

"Ah, Hart, I shall be happy in being with you, for you are all that I have to care for now, and you well know I know what it is to rough it."

"Yes, you can adapt yourself to circumstances as well as any one I ever saw; but you will have a pleasant cabin, the boys will give you a hearty welcome, the one woman in camp, Betsy the Boss, as she loves to be called,

will look to your comfort, and four days of the will be in Julesburg."

"Then I will have no cause to complain, for my guitar and violin along, my music, a lot of and plenty of fishing tackle and ammunition, speak of my work basket full of needles, thread, darning cotton, so I can keep busy and will have mother to the camp."

"A pretty mother you will be, sis."

"Thanks for the compliment."

"Oh, I did not mean it that way, though pretty—yes, beautiful, more so than ever; but nothing but a child in years—"

"I am twenty-four."

"Yes, and even in your few years have known much of sorrow and trouble; but tell me, Rita, just you came West?"

"I will, for you might as well know it now as later."

"Yes, I am anxious to know all."

"Well, you are not aware of all that has happened. I will go back to you— Pardon me for reviving memories, but I must—"

"Don't mind me, sis."

"Your fatal duel with our stepfather, I meant."

"Yes."

"Mother, poor mother, had given him full confidence, everything, and thus he got all our property in his session."

"Mother's death—"

"He killed her!"

"Yes, her heart was broken, I knew and she felt by her marriage with him, and that in trusting him had ruined us."

"You killed him, and that made his son his heir, then began my greatest suffering, for my husband determined to get rid of me, and, as you know, set to slowly poison me to death."

"The discovery of his crime sent him a fugitive of the land, and you were also a wanderer here in West."

"In settling up the estate it was discovered that was only a little money for me, but the furniture and other personal effects I had a right to sell, and did."

"Then our attorney told me that what else there I could not touch without my husband's signature."

"One day my lawyer came to me and asked regarding some land father had bought in the West long years ago."

"I told him we had always considered it worthless, but my mother had paid taxes upon it as long as lived, as it was father's urgent request she should do."

"The lawyer said that the tax bill had just been paid and was for a large amount, ten times the amount before paid."

"So he wrote out to an attorney near there and



ed that three railroads had centered on the land, a was springing up near by, and the property was being most valuable.

High prices were offered for lots on our land, and as I had hundreds of acres there, we would realize a large sum by the sale.

But then came the trouble in the shape of my husband's signature, which must be had to make the sale; he was a fugitive from justice, and so must be killed.

In this unfortunate predicament there was nothing to be done but find him."

"And you have come out here to do so?"

"I have."

"Have you any proof of his being here?"

"I have!" was the decisive reply of Rita Rathburn.

## CHAPTER X.

### SAVED BY STRATEGY.

At last Rita broke the silence by saying:

"Yes, I put a detective on his track, and he discovered that he was last seen at Leavenworth, and came over west with a wagon train bound to Denver.

To Denver, however, he did not go, but came to the land, and it was said became a stage driver under a name by the name of Alf Slade."

Alf Slade is our division chief, Rita, and I know my driver for three hundred miles each side of his headquarters."

Well, he may have given up stage driving for other work, but I am sure he is out here, for he was last heard of in the Overland near Julesburg."

"There is nothing he could be doing out here, or I could certainly have heard of him."

"He might have changed his name, and doubtless he has."

"Ah! that may be so; but I would know him at a glance."

"He would know you, Hart, equally as well."

"True."

"You have not changed your name, and so he would recognize it, and, what is more, if he did he would be on the watch for you, that you did not see and recognize him."

"By growing his beard and dressing in rough clothes, graying his hair long and assuming another name, you might not recognize him, especially as you would not expect his being here."

"But, granting that he is here, what is your intention regarding him?"

"In the first place, I do not intend that he shall kill me, as he vowed to do when you killed his father, in a duel."

"I will simply have to be on the watch for an assassin, sis."

"I will do better, for I will find the man myself."

"And then?"

"I will see that when I find him I have him in my power."

"Yes, for he would kill you as quickly as he would me, as you have had reason to know."

"I have indeed."

"Once the man fascinated me, and I was as his very slave."

"I deemed it love, but it was his influence over me simply that made me marry him."

"My eyes were opened, and it made another being out of me; but I tried to make the best of my mistake, to put up with my ignoble bargain."

"You know what followed, Hart, and that he and his father sent our mother to her grave, and made us, as we believed, almost beggars."

"Now it turns out we are rich, but to get our own we must find Burr Ford and make terms with him."

"He must not be killed, for he has information and papers my attorney must have."

"We can get him in our power and with threats of sending him East for trial can bring him to terms."

"Now, Hart, Burr Ford must be found, and when he is, leave him to me!"

"All right, Rita, for I know you can manage the whole affair well."

"I will put Buffalo Bill and Scott Kane, my pledged guards of the pony express upon the search also, and if he is out here we will find him."

"You may rest assured of that, Rita. I will likewise have a talk with Chief Slade, and see if he can give me any clue as to a man of his description being on the Overland trail."

"Do all you can, for the man must be found."

"It will soon be generally known that I am here with you, and then, remembering his former power over me, I believe he will look me up, if only to force money from me."

"I only hope that he is in hard luck and will find me."

"Don't let him make a fool of you as before, sis."

"Trust me for that, Hart. I was a fool once, but a sad experience has taught me sound sense, and I am iron-hearted now."

Thus they talked, until the gray dawn of morning appeared and Hart Rathburn gave a sigh of relief as another spot where the outlaws had held up coaches and Pony Riders in the past was gone by in safety.

The relay stations were reached on time, and the stock tender at each one reported that no sign of the outlaws had been seen.



"If we pass the valley ahead in safety, sister, I will feel pretty sure of going through all right," said Hart, as they drove away from the relay station where they had had breakfast.

The sun rose as they left the station, and in spite of her night ride Rita Rathburn looked very beautiful, and as she again drew her thick veil over her face Hart could not refrain from saying:

"You have certainly become more beautiful, sis, in spite of your sorrows, for you look as fresh as a dew-drop. But, here is the valley, and——"

"Halt!"

"The Night Riders bar your way!"

In spite of being on his guard and half expecting he would be again held up on the trail, Hart Rathburn started at the bold command, and his face whitened.

He seemed to realize at a glance that the coach would be robbed, his sister taken as a hostage for ransom, and that no help whatever was near.

The coach had just descended from a ridge into a large valley, broken by timber, rocks and a stream.

There were innumerable places where an ambush could be held, and the presence of foes never suspected until they drove upon them.

The trail ran through a growth of thick timber, with bowlders upon either side, and the one who had given the command to halt rode suddenly into the trail, his rifle in hand.

He was mounted upon a black horse, his costume was black, and his face was covered with the sable mask of the Night Riders.

Hart Rathburn was surprised at being halted in the daytime.

It was something that he had not heard before of the Night Riders doing.

He recalled that the delay for breakfast for his sister put him nearly an hour behind, and had he come right on without a stop at the last station, longer than for a changing of teams, it would have still been dark when he reached the valley.

The Night Riders had been expecting him sooner, that was evident, and in spite of his arriving at their ambush after daybreak, they were not to be cheated out of their prey, and so broke their rule and held him up in the daytime.

Suddenly an idea flashed across the ready mind of Hart Rathburn, and as he drew rein and put his foot upon the heavy California brake to halt, he said in a whisper:

"Let me manage this, sis; only help me out."

"I will."

He dared not disobey the command to halt, so he drew rein very quickly and, with a sarcastic laugh, said:

"Oh, I don't mind halting, pard, though I'm already

behind from having met your chief, and if you any pickings after he and his coyotes have gone the outfit, you are welcome to all you get."

"The chief halted you, then?" quickly asked the horseman.

"You bet he did."

"Where?"

"In Pleasant Valley Park."

"When?"

"A little after nightfall."

"What did he get?"

"Enough to make Alf Slade put a force out, down and hang every coyote of you."

"Good! Then he got the box?"

"No; you can have the strong box if you want after he has had his hand in it you may be sure clean-picked as a deer bone after a coyote has dinner on it."

"How much did he get?"

"The paymaster's money to pay off the whole den for two months was in the box; but you'll have to ask your head wolf tell you how much it was."

"Good!"

"Anything else?"

"Here's the box."

"I ask you if he got anything else."

"Now you know if there was anything else after he got it."

"Why, he even made this lady pay a big ransom, was so mean, robbing her of things that can do her good."

"Well, we risk our life to get gold, and we was we can find."

"Well, you can look over the baggage if you want."

"Not much, for I know the chief too well to feed he has left anything of value; but I think if he had the lady there for ransom he could have gotten more."

"He thought so at first, but concluded if he had General Burke's daughter captive the army would take it a little too hot for him, so he concluded to rob instead."

"Ah! it is Miss Burke, is it?" The masked man glanced fixedly at Rita's veiled face as she sat quietly listening to her brother's clever and bold ruse to avoid being robbed, and wondering if he would be successful.

"Well, sir outlaw, what interest have you in this?" asked Rita, undauntedly.

"None; as the chief got your valuables; but if I did not dare hold you for ransom, it is more than I can take the responsibility of now doing, Miss Burke."

"You are wise, for if you know General Burke, you must understand that he would call out every soldier on this frontier to run down the captors of his daughter."



"He has not the power to act against you for your lawless deeds."

"Yes, I know him, and I'll let you severely

"I already broke your rules in holding me up in the me, haven't you?" asked Hart Rathburn, with a

"You were due here before dawn, and I waited."

"Yes, your chief put me behind. Don't want the box, or it's of no use to me."

"Go, drive on!"

"Thank you for nothing," and Hart Rathburn drove

## CHAPTER XI.

### THE SILENT WARNING.

When he had accomplished the good work of saving the coach from robbery, and Rita Rathburn from capture, Buffalo Bill, with a word to his pard, Scott Kane, went silently as a ghost.

He put spurs to his horse, for he not only had a hard task to make, a double duty to him, but there was much to make up, lost in his halting to render good office.

So, on he went, no longer having any dread for the coach or its fair passenger, for he knew how well his horse had worked.

After station he came to, a rapid change of horses was made, and, still bearing the valuable express, he sped on through the night.

He urged his horses to their greatest speed, one after another, as he mounted a fresh one at a relay station, and was determined to make up for lost time if horse and human endurance combined could do it.

It was just midnight when he reached the end of his ride and he felt that he had accomplished a big task, though he was still behind time.

He had ridden from Julesburg to Rocky Ridge, and on he went, and had delayed over two hours on the road in the rescue of the coach, while he had also ridden back the trail to Wild Waters, and thence on with his two horses from there.

Without a moment's more delay than was necessary, the gallant pony rider was off on his return, and the horses were kept at the same tremendous and killing pace from station to station.

Wild Waters was reached, and there a halt of a few minutes was made for Scott Kane to tell him what had shown his rescue.

When he was off again, and Rocky Ridge was reached, ten minutes behind the time of the pony rider who had ridden that run,

Mounted upon a fresh horse, he was away again as soon as he had taken a small repast, and just as the sun peered over the mountains he said, with grim satisfaction:

"I will catch the coach before it reaches Julesburg, and go in ahead of time in spite of my double run."

He had hardly uttered the words when, in glancing far ahead on the trail, his keen eyes caught sight of a bit of paper fluttering in the air.

A closer look, as he approached at full speed, showed that a string was stretched across the trail, and in the center of it, about as high as his breast when mounted, was fastened a slip of paper.

He at once drew rein, took the paper from the string, cutting the latter from the trees to which it was tied on either side of the trail.

The paper was addressed upon one side to:

"W. F. Cody, Pony Rider."

Upon the other, written in a good hand with a pencil, was the following, which Buffalo Bill read aloud:

"The coach driven by your pard, Hart Rathburn, has been twice halted, first by Captain Kit's men, who robbed it, and also the lady passenger.

"It was halted near here half an hour ago, but as there was nothing to get, it was allowed to go on.

"A third party of the Night Riders are in Black Canyon, and the leader of that is Captain Kit himself, and he will surely hold the lady for ransom, so try your best to warn Driver Rathburn of what he may expect, and save her from a captivity that will be cruel.

"If you reach here too late to overtake and warn the coach, you might attempt a rescue, for there will be but five Night Riders in the third band.

"A bold dash might stampede them, and you have taken chances with greater odds, as I happen to well know, Buffalo Bill.

"This is a silent but well-intended warning from one who can sign no name other than

"THE SILENT WARNING."

Buffalo Bill did not hesitate an instant after reading this strange note, but put spurs to his horse and dashed on at a swifter pace than before.

He had ridden about a mile when he suddenly wheeled out of the trail into what seemed only a deer path.

"I know what I'll do," he muttered, in a determined way, as he sped along.

"Fortunately, I know this country well, and though I cannot overtake the coach before it gets into Black Canyon, I can get to the cliffs overhanging the spot where I know the Night Riders will be in ambush, and



once there, when they hold Rathburn up, maybe I will have a chance to chip in.

"But I must ride for it."

Having decided upon what he would do, Buffalo Bill pressed his horse harder and harder, muttering from time to time in a sympathetic way to the straining animal.

"I must do it, old horse, for your speed alone can help now."

At last Buffalo Bill wheeled suddenly out of the deer trail, threw his rein over a limb, seized his express pouches, and began to climb the steep hillside on foot.

In the meanwhile, Hart Rathburn came to the Black Canyon with the feeling of a man who would be content if he passed through it in safety.

Some presentiment of evil seemed to have impressed him.

If his sister was not along—if he only did not carry the paymaster's money—he would gladly take all chances which he might personally have to run.

The Black Canyon was a pass through a ridge of dark-colored rock running from mountain to mountain.

The ridge was not over a quarter of a mile in width, and had precipitous sides, causing it to have the appearance of an immense wall of stone.

The canyon, or pass, was like a split in the ridge, not over a hundred feet wide at its greatest width, and on each side at its base were huge pieces of rocks which had split off and fallen from the cliffs.

There were also clumps of stunted pines growing in the canyon, and with the rocks they formed the very best places for an ambush for horses and men.

The cliff on either side rose from forty to sixty feet, and there were stories told that the Black Canyon had been the scene of many an Indian massacre, when one tribe massacred another, and it was known that a wagon train of emigrants had all been slain there by redskins.

That there were graves and many human bones scattered through the canyon appeared proof of its having been a scene fatal to many, whether Indians or whites.

"Here is the Black Canyon, Rita," said Hart Rathburn, as he drove into the deadly pass.

"It appears well named, for the rocks on either side are almost black."

"Yes, and its history is a black one as well."

"Why, those look like human bones, Hart; they are, for see those two skulls!"

"Yes, there are many of those to be seen here."

"Why do you riders not bury them?"

"Buffalo Bill suggested doing so once, but there was a great howl raised, for some are known to be whites, others redskins of hostile tribes to each other, and to bury them together the Indians would become enraged

while the men in the camps swear they will not skin and paleface, good and bad, in a grave together."

"And so they remain unburied, though beings."

"Yes, Rita, and we Pony Riders call it the Skulls."

Rita Rathburn looked sadly about her, and marked:

"The Pony Riders have well named the place. It is in this canyon that you dreaded that the Night Riders might again hold us up."

"Yes."

"And what then?"

"I can only play the same bluff game, Rita, as last time. By Jove! I was right—see there!"

As Rathburn spoke there stepped out from the large rocks, upon either side of the trail, forms in black, and masked.

There were two of them, and they were on foot. As Hart glanced quickly behind him he beheld the horsemen also ride into view.

Then he again looked ahead, and his eyes fell upon another horseman riding out from behind a rock whence had come one of the men on foot.

The latter halted directly in the trail and held his hand in silence.

Hart Rathburn drove on until his leaders were close up with the man whose horse barred their way. Then he drew rein.

At the same time the daring driver broke out in a loud laugh.

"You seem amused," said the horseman.

"I am."

"I don't see the joke, and I guess you won't find it so funny when I tell you that you are in the hands of the Night Riders."

"You are the third gang of coyotes that has held me since last night."

"Ah! then you have been halted before?"

The question was asked in an anxious tone.

"I rather think I have."

"I thought you were a new man, but you are Hart Rathburn, the pony rider."

"Right! go up head!"

"Who halted you?"

"Captain Kit and his thieving gang; then, a mile back, one of his lieutenants and his pack of coyotes, and now you and your gold-hungry wolves!"

"What did Captain Kit get?"

"Just take a look and see if you can find anything of value that escaped him—if so, you are heartily welcome to come."

"I will, for I've had more experience at this business."



only need look at that young lady to see that he has looked capturing a treasure," was the bold response. "I am Captain Kit."

His reply of the leader of the Night Riders was a rebuff and disappointment to Hart Rathburn.

He had hoped, as before, his suggestion of a search of the coach would be sure proof that there was nothing to be gained of value.

Recalling the remark of Captain Kit that his officers had looked making a capture of Rita to hold for ransom, he carried out the words of the leader of the second band of outlaws, that if halted again the same consideration would not be shown the fair passenger that had been thus far.

"What do you mean?" asked Hart, pretending not to understand his words.

"I mean that I see a treasure to be gained for the ransom of that young lady."

"Do you mean that you would dare hold the daughter of the general commanding this department a prisoner until she was ransomed?"

"Why not? And as I have a grudge against General Burke, I can now even up matters by holding you for ransom, Miss Burke."

"I warn you that the insult will be avenged," spoke Rita, indignantly, and she drew her thick veil more closely over her face, which he could not see at all.

"It is catching before hanging, young lady, and with you in my possession I can make my own terms with General Burke."

"You must go with me, Miss Burke, so get what nothing you care to from your trunks, and I will make a bundle of it all, and carry it along."

"Come, dismount!"

He spoke sternly, and with his voice raised as though to terrorize the woman.

"I refuse to go!" was the firm rejoinder of Rita.

"Then I shall have to use force."

"Dismount from that coach or I will have my men get up there and bind you securely, for I stand no trifling now!"

Hart Rathburn dropped his hand upon his revolver.

It was evident from his look that he intended to defy all odds and resist his sister's capture.

She saw this at a glance and quickly said:

"I will go, and you will find that I will be ransomed with lead and steel instead of with gold."

The man laughed rudely, and Rita whispered quickly: "It must be, Hart."

"You and your friend, Buffalo Bill, can rescue me."

"It would be madness to resist, for you would be shot down mercilessly and I would still be a prisoner."

"It is true, but it breaks my heart to see them take you, sis," and the deep voice quivered with emotion.

"Come, I dislike waiting, Miss Burke," rudely said the outlaw leader, and he held up his hand as though to aid her down from the box.

But there came a sharp report, and quickly a yell of amazement and pain from the outlaw leader's lips.

Ere the surprised and terrified Night Riders could move, a second shot came from the same direction, and the other outlaw, who had dismounted and stood near his chief, fell dead in his tracks.

"Hands up, all of you!" cried a voice that seemed to come from the clouds.

But the three mounted men had no idea of surrender.

Their foe could not be seen, so was certainly not down in the canyon. They put spurs to their horses and turned in flight.

"That is Buffalo Bill's war cry!" yelled Hart Rathburn, and, as he uttered the words, the tall form of the pony rider captain appeared upon the top of the cliff above them.

There he stood, his broad sombrero in his left hand, his revolver in the right, and his eyes peering down into the canyon and watching the rapid flight of the men as they spurred like mad through the gap to seek safety through the speed of their horses.

"What a grand picture!"

It was Rita Rathburn that spoke, and her gaze was fastened upon the pony rider.

As she looked she saw him step back from the cliff; but he reappeared in a minute, with a coiled lariat in his hand, a weapon he never went without.

One end of it he had already made fast to a small pine, and the other he dropped over into the canyon.

It reached within a few feet of the bottom.

Swinging himself fearlessly over the edge, he began the descent, hand under hand, and as his feet touched the ground, Hart Rathburn and his sister stood there to receive him.

"Ho, Pard Cody! I owe you another favor to the many already due, for you do not know what a great service you have rendered," and Hart Rathburn grasped the hand of his pledged pard, who answered:

"I can guess that you were in trouble."

"But let me make you known to my sister. Rita, this is the man of whom you have heard me so often speak—Buffalo Bill, I will call him, for that name explains all."

"I also owe debts of gratitude to my brother's friend I can never repay," said Rita Rathburn, feelingly, as she held out her hand.

"Let me tell you how glad I am to welcome you to the Wild West, Miss Rathburn, for we needed your presence in our life here."



"Thank you, Mr. Cody——"

"I am Buffalo Bill to my best pards, Miss Rathburn, and you are to be one."

"Then Buffalo Bill it shall be."

"But let me thank you for last night's rescue and now again for having been saved by you from captivity."

"I am glad I was so fortunate; but, Hart, the man I shot is not dead, and we must see what we can do for him. Then I'll have to ride for it, for I am far behind time, you know."

"In a good cause, though; but you are ever merciful to think of that wounded outlaw, for I had forgotten him."

"Now, tell me how you came to be upon the cliff."

"Read this letter, and it will explain, for it caused me to turn off the trail when I found that I could not overtake you."

"It was tied in the center of a string stretched across the trail."

"Now to see if that wounded man is beyond aid."

Handing the written warning to Hart Rathburn, Buffalo Bill walked rapidly to where lay the wounded outlaw, and drew from his face the black mask that still concealed it.

"He claimed to be Captain Kit himself, and—— Great God, Rita, it is Burr Ford!" cried Hart Rathburn.

"Yes, my guilty husband—worse even than I believed him to be, for he is the chief of the Night Riders," said Rita, in a low tone, and her face as livid as the dead.

She stood like one dazed at the discovery. Her eyes fastened upon the man lying at her feet, the man who had proclaimed himself to be Capatin Kit, the cruel chief of the Night Riders.

Quickly had the bitterly wronged young wife found the man whom she had been in search of, had dared so much to find.

## CHAPTER XII.

### THE PLEDGE KEPT.

It was a sad, pitiable scene there in the "Place of Skulls," a fitting spot for such a sight, such an ending to an evil life.

Buffalo Bill's bullet had cut its way downward through

the body of the outlaw leader, and he was beyond human aid.

He realized it, and his eyes turned upon the rider chief, and he said, faintly:

"You have ended my life trail—yes, I am Burr Ford—tell her to come here."

But Rita had already walked to where he lay, he removed her thick veil as though to the better see the face of the man who was indeed her husband, who had been his sins and his treatment of her.

"Poor Burr! and this is the end," she said, and knelt by his side and took his hand.

"The end, and I brought it upon myself—I was bad, Rita, and my worst crime was my treatment of you."

"But I forgive you, Burr, if it is one atom of comfort to you now to hear me say so."

"It is everything, and I will atone all in my power for you shall have proof of all your claims to rights, and Hart's—I have them safe in an underwear—I know that you are rich or will be, and I am plotting more directly against you, to get you to the West and kill you, for I knew Hart was here, and he was doomed—but that man, Buffalo Bill, has ended it and——"

His eyes closed, he writhed in pain, and the sentence was never finished, for he passed away in a spasmodic anguish.

Rita gently closed the eyes and folded the hands upon the broad breast.

Then Buffalo Bill broke the painful silence with:

"Hart, we will place his body in the coach, and bury him with his dead comrade—and bury them at Julesburg."

"No one must know who he was, or what he was to your sister, for you need no witnesses to prove his death other than myself, and being dead, you and your sister can claim your own without papers to prove your right."

"I desire to make up lost time, so will leave you, if I can find the one who gave me that silent warning—we can track the Night Riders to their den, very quickly after my return to Julesburg."

"Miss Rathburn, I will be glad to welcome you when you get to your frontier home, and permit me to say that you are a braver little woman I never met than you are."

A few moments more and, having seen the coach



lastly human freight inside ready to start, Buffalo  
went up hand over hand on the lariat to the cliff  
, waved his hat in farewell, and soon after reached  
horse and was away.

he once more reached the pony trail, he saw a  
man awaiting him.

knew him as one he had met long before, and a  
whose life he had once saved from Indians, but he  
not seen him for a long time.

Ho, Gordon, still out here?"

Yes, Mr. Cody, but going—you got my note?"

Then you wrote that warning?"

Yes, for I had done wrong in turning outlaw, and  
ed to redeem myself in some way."

Well, you did so; but you are a night rider, then?"

Was; but I have come to myself, and being a good  
sharp, I won about half the money the men robbed  
st people of, and I concluded to quit the game.

I'll do more, for I will give you a map of the trail  
he Night Riders' den, and let you know that Bad-  
Bender is the spy of Capain Kit on the Overland  
and badly needs hanging."

Good! but Captain Kit is no more, for I killed him  
lack Canyon, thanks to the news you gave me."

Then I'll leave the West in double-quick time, and  
honest, for I have enough saved to make me com-  
ble."

You are wise to go—while you can, Gordon.

Under the circumstances, I wish you luck, for you  
do a good turn, and I hope it is in you to become  
est—yes, I wish you luck."

As I do you in your Night Riders' hunt—here is a  
of the trail to their den—good-by, and don't refuse  
ake my hand, for I am honest in my reform, believe  
Buffalo Bill."

Stick to it," and the pony rider captain grasped the  
of the ex-outlaw, and dashed off on his way once  
e, arriving at the end of his run just on time, after  
most remarkable ride and splendid services rendered.

was indeed a warm welcome that Rita Rathburn got  
the men of the station and pony camp, and Boss  
made her very comfortable, at once taking a great  
y to the lovely young woman.

There was great rejoicing over the death of Captain  
Kit, and he was buried with his comrade, no one sus-  
pecting what the outlaw leader of the Night Riders had  
been to Rita Rathburn.

The moment Buffalo Bill had arrived in camp he held  
a long interview with Alf Slade, the result being that  
the men were called together, Bender was sent for, and  
he was tried as a spy of the Night Riders upon the  
charges William Cody brought against him. All could  
understand then how it was that the outlaws had been so  
well posted as to the affairs of the Overland trail, the  
coming of treasure and valuable freight.

It took just half an hour to try the man, find him  
guilty and hang him, and the work was just over when  
Hart Rathburn's coach came in and the entire camp  
stood ready to welcome Rita Rathburn after her many  
adventures.

That night a band of picked men rode out of camp,  
under the leadership of Buffalo Bill, and twenty-four  
hours later they returned successful, for they had sur-  
prised the retreat of the Night Riders.

It was a case where no mercy was shown, and the  
booty that fell to the victors was large.

After a few weeks in her new home, Rita Rathburn  
departed, escorted by her brother, who had already sent  
Scott Kane on ahead as his business representative, to  
look after the valuable landed property belonging to him-  
self and his sister.

The two got possession of their property without trou-  
ble, and then left for the East, leaving Scott Kane be-  
hind to manage the estate.

But some months after Scott Kane also left for the  
East, and it was to claim as his bride Rita Rathburn.

They were married in St. Louis, Hart giving the  
beautiful bride away, and the most honored guest pres-  
ent was the third one of the "Pledged Pardes"—Buffalo  
Bill, the captain of the "Saddle Sharps," as Alf Slade  
always called his Pony Riders of the Overland Trail.

•THE END.

Next week's Buffalo Bill Stories (No. 15) will contain  
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